BEING HERE
Emplacement and Displacement
in the Life Stories of two Somali-Australians

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Abstract

Our age is often described in terms of movement, instability and uncertainty, leading to the sense of homelessness or uprootedness that John Berger once described to be the “quintessential experience” of our time. Struck by this fluidity, many Western intellectuals came to long for a means of replacing the rigid and suffocating narrowness of national belonging with the lightness and ease of the vagabond, the nomad, the traveller, who, owning nothing but her own life, slips in and out of different worlds. Displacement came to be seen as paradigmatic of a time of deterritorialisation and refugees came to be the symbolic figures of this age of movement and fluctuation, challenging established notions of a “national order of things” (Malkki 1995b), of a world that can be neatly mapped and of cultures that are deeply rooted in places that belong to them.

But these sentiments often left unanswered the question of how being-at-home or being-without-home is actually lived. Do important existential categories such as home, territoriality and belonging cease to exist in the face of displacement? How do people shape and re-shape them? How is displacement made sense of in everyday life and in relation to a wider place-world?

Using these questions as a starting point, this thesis focuses on the life stories of Halima and Omar, two Somalis in their mid-fifties living in Melbourne, and discusses the interrelated meanings of emplacement and displacement. It also works with a series of photographs taken by Mohamed, who, upon returning to war-torn Mogadishu after thirty years abroad, began depicting his relationship to lost, ruined and imagined places. Mirroring the particularities of Mohamed’s, Omar’s and Halima’s experiences of place, displacement and home-building with fragments of the author’s own story of movement and emplacement, the thesis takes a critical look at the use of the figure of the refugee as a metaphor for alienation and estrangement from society.

Halima’s and Omar’s stories and Mohamed’s photographs give an insight into the struggles and violent forces that at times crushed their hopes, and the strengths and capabilities that allowed them to regain a sense of balance. Their stories stand in stark
contrast to ‘refugee stories’ as mere documents of trauma, instability and victimhood and speak for a more complex understanding of displacement. The contrast between the metaphorical use of the figure of the refugee as nomadic, rhizomic, or deterritorialised and Omar’s and Halima’s lived experience suggests that much of the contemporary reading of displacement as a placeless phenomenon is built on an uncritical and confused understanding of space and movement. While roots have come to stand for the postmodern “horror of being bound and fixed” (Bauman 1995: 91), this horror doesn’t seem to be shared by Halima, Mohamed or Omar, who fear remaining in transit forever, never arriving anywhere, never again becoming someone in relation to somewhere. Rather than focusing on the metaphorical treatment of space as boundless and open-ended, the particularities of Halima’s and Omar’s stories demonstrate the need for a more complex and nuanced view of displacement, one that takes the material and geographical location of social life more seriously and attempts to “get back into place” (Casey 1993).
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Declaration

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award to the candidate of any other degree or diploma, except where due reference is made in the text.

To the best of my knowledge this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Where the work is based on joint research or publications, this thesis discloses the relative contributions of the respective workers or authors.

Annika Lems
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Die Welt ist groß, doch in uns wird sie tief
wie Meeresgrund.

The world is large, but in us it becomes deep
as the bottom of the sea.

(Rainer Maria Rilke)
I
Introduction
1.

GREETING XAMAR

After Mohamed disembarked from the plane and set foot in the city he had left behind thirty years ago, he knelt down on the tarmac to kiss the ground. Fellow passengers gave him puzzled looks, awkward giggles, smiles. It was his way of greeting Xamar, ‘the red one’, as Somalis often like to call Mogadishu.

Over the past two decades the colour red has come to take on a new symbolic meaning for Somalis. It represents the violence, fear and terror that have devastated the country, driven more than a million people out of Somalia and led to the breakdown of the government, as well as to ever-shifting alliances, and attacks and counter attacks, among clans and sub-clans. In 1981, only nineteen years old, and after months of struggling to gain a passport, Mohamed migrated to Australia – partly because he had met an Australian woman, a young nurse who had come to Somalia as a member of a health team assisting refugees, and partly because he sensed the upcoming civil war.
Mohamed was amongst the first Somalis to settle in Melbourne. In the thirty years that followed he married the Australian woman he had fallen in love with, had four children with her, studied, become a successful telecommunications expert and made Melbourne his home. During this time, with the war uprooting his elderly parents and his brothers and sisters, and bringing many of them to Melbourne, a Somalia that lived and breathed had slipped away into a forgotten area in the back of his mind. While not entirely out of his life, Somalia had taken on the shape of a somewhere.

Around 2009, however, something changed. Somalia began crawling back into Mohamed’s thoughts. Its aches and pains began to preoccupy him. It was time, he thought, to look for cures – and such a search needed the strength and energy of every Somali, old and young, man and woman, in the country and outside of it. He gave up his job in Melbourne in exchange for the (financial and personal) insecurity that came with the role of an IT advisor to the Somali transitional government. This government was in desperate need of educated people like Mohamed, driven by the motivation to rebuild Somalia and holding a passport from a Western country that allowed them to travel, connect and negotiate with other countries. From now on Mohamed was constantly on the move: from country to country, from UN conference to UN conference, from one international meeting to the next. But despite leading the life of a globetrotter, none of his travels took him back to the place all his thoughts and effort were directed towards. Because of the continuous instability in Mogadishu and the risk for politicians to move about freely, most Somali ministers operated from neighbouring countries. In August 2012, the transitional government was replaced by the Federal Government of Somalia and government departments began returning to Mogadishu. While Somalia was at the centre of Mohamed’s thoughts, initially his position didn’t require him to return to his country. In 2011, however, he was overcome by an urge to see and feel Mogadishu as it had become. Despite the dangers of travelling in such a lawless place, and despite the continuing threat of attacks by Islamist al-Shabaab and Hizbul Islam rebels, Mohamed decided to embark on this return journey. Walking through the devastated streets and buildings, he took photos – images he would take back with him to Melbourne.

Back in Australia, sitting in a small coffee shop at Melbourne University, where he was a research fellow at the Asia Centre, Mohamed showed me these photos. In 2009, when I was trying to find my way around Melbourne and looking for Somalis interested to
work with me on their life stories, he was amongst the first people I had met. In fact, he was amongst the first people in Melbourne I became friends with. Looking for organisations to provide an entry point into the community, I had come across Mohamed as the chairman of the Somali Cultural Association. While none of the organisations I contacted eventually paved my way into the field, my friendship with Mohamed marked the beginning of my research taking shape. The photos of his journeys he shared with me during his stays in Melbourne, or in emails laconically signed ‘the nomad’, began to form a bridge between us, and to shape some of the main themes that would come to preoccupy me in my thesis.

Sitting in the university coffee shop, flicking through the photos he had taken in Mogadishu on his laptop, he paused and pointed. “Look!” he said to me. “I really like this one.” I was surprised that he liked the photo. It depicts one of the many bullets that, as he told me, cover the city’s ground. Against the backdrop of a grey gravel road, the bullet looks tiny, almost lost and innocent. Laughing, he explained that because of their whistling noise people in Mogadishu have come to jokingly call them ‘Yusuf’. *Ssuf, ssuf, ssuf* they go…

But for Mohamed the bullet wasn’t what moved him about the picture. “Look at the ground it lies on,” he told me and pointed at the road. “These rocks, they are so special, so specific for this part of Mogadishu, that even if I hadn’t been the one to take this photo, I would have recognised it.” “And the bullet?,” I asked. “They are everywhere,” Mohamed said. “Even if you are not looking for them, you will find them everywhere.”

While I had read the photo as another testimony to the destruction of Mogadishu, Mohamed was preoccupied with the sense of *place* it depicted. The stones that moved him to take the picture are the stones that cover a road that leads from the city to the ocean. That road stands for the light and easy times Mohamed experienced in Mogadishu as a teenager, a time before the Barre regime’s violence against dissident clans, and a time he remembers in terms of the city’s beauty and sophistication. It was the road he promenaded along with friends on warm summer evenings, when people flocked towards the beach for picnics and games. Because the beach was such a popular place for all inhabitants of Mogadishu to meet and spend time together, and the road the best way to walk there from the city, Mohamed stresses that anyone who has lived there
will recognise the stones as part of the road that leads towards the Indian Ocean. Far from being another sad document of the breakdown of Somalia, the photo evokes a sense of past unity, of the days when people from all clans literally walked down the same path. It calls upon the memories of all Mogadishians, those who still live there and those whom the war has displaced, and it does so through *place*. Just as Mohamed, much to the bewilderment of the people around him, had kissed the tarmac to greet the city he had left behind, so did his photo embrace the sense of place that had carried his being-at-home in Mogadishu.

If a stony road in a city left behind so many years ago has the power to evoke such a strong sense of attachment to (or perhaps even love for) place, what is it that underlies this feeling? Is it what some theorists have described as “the power of place” (Agnew & Duncan 1989; Gallagher 1994; Hayden 1997; De Blij 2009)? Or is it, perhaps, the opposite? Does the strength of Mohamed’s image derive from the very sense of displacement it depicts? In a world in which people like Mohamed (the ‘nomad’) can be at a conference in Geneva today, at another in Mali tomorrow, and at a meeting in Dubai the day after, and in which people like me can move to the other side of the globe to write a thesis about people who have also left their home-places behind, are homelessness and uprootedness, as John Berger (1984: 55) has suggested, the “quintessential experience” of our time? Then again, how can *displacement* in and for itself explain the abiding strength of stones on a road in a place like Mogadishu that has witnessed so much grief?

Mohamed’s story of the image draws attention to the complex dynamics between emplacement and displacement as lived and felt in people’s everyday lives. It raises questions about the links between place and the sensual, place and memory, place and movement, and place and the larger world. Mohamed’s strong attachment to place also evokes questions about the common portrayal of people who have experienced displacement as homelessness, as a being out of place, or, literally, as placelessness; it challenges us to ask how people actually shape and reshape places, particularly in the face of displacement, and how they negotiate their position in relation to the wider place-world.
Mohamed’s photograph evokes a sense of the lived tension between emplacement and displacement – the core theme that runs through this thesis. At the heart of this endeavour are the lives and stories of Halima Mohamed and Omar Farah Dhillawa, who, over the course of the past two years, have told me their life stories. In weaving its way through their ups and downs, victories and losses, hopes and bereavements, this thesis looks at the way emplacement and displacement are felt and understood in the everyday lives of two individuals. Different paths, personal histories and coincidences brought both of them to Melbourne, where they have made different corners of the city their home. In Melbourne, the city I had also come to as a stranger, our paths crossed. It was here, in Melbourne, that they told me their life stories – and I told them some of mine.

In many ways this thesis is anchored in the power of storytelling. It is through stories that humans travel their inner landscapes with others and thereby move them beyond their inner selves, and it is through stories that these landscapes morph and transcend and receive a presence in the here and now. I wasn’t just a silent listener, the passive recipient of life stories. Rather, in travelling through these landscapes together, in letting them leak into the present, we allowed our lives to touch each other. *Storying*, the means through which we bring our inner world out and take the outer world in, has the ability to form, transform and change our experiences of things. Lives are, Michael Jackson (2002: 245) suggests, always storied. It is through storying that we overcome our separateness, that we work towards a common ground and that we rework reality. Through telling each other stories, through walking and talking Melbourne, Mogadishu, Puntland, Dubai and Vienna together, my understanding of emplacement and displacement took shape. In order to attend to this crucial moment of ethnographic work – to come to an understanding of meaning as a lived intersubjective reality, as the product of a dialogue that includes the material, imaginative and emotional landscapes of human relationships – some of my own stories also came to enter this thesis.

In sharp contrast to the grand schemes, numbers and models that mark much research in the field of ‘forced migration’, the zooming in on two individuals’ life stories allows for a close look at the particularity and everydayness of being-in-place. This is not to suggest that Halima’s and Omar’s stories do not have the power to speak for more than themselves. As philosopher Jeff Malpas stresses, “for the most part, it is the place of the
ordinary and the everyday in and through which what is extraordinary shines forth” (Malpas 2012: 14). The following travels through stories will show how, through an engagement with the ordinary activities around which human life takes shape, the world itself comes into view. Throughout this journey, Mohamed’s photographs accompany and pave the way for my thinking, writing and storying. The sensitivity, beauty and poetry of his way of seeing and depicting Mogadishu form junctures, or crossroads, between chapters that allow for a moment of reflection and a chance to gather, let go of or re-emplace thoughts. Above all, Mohamed’s images of all the lost, ruined, re-awakening and stubbornly persisting places he came across work as a skilful reminder of some of the deep-seated layers of emplacement and displacement that cannot always easily be expressed in words. Yet, it is perhaps through stories of displacement that emplacement best comes to the fore. As T.S. Eliot writes in the last stanza of his poem *Little Gidding*:

> We shall not cease from exploration  
> And the end of all our exploring  
> Will be to arrive where we started  
> And know the place for the first time.

**Two People, Two Places**

Australia and Somalia, two countries which, each in their own ways, have movement and migration at the core of their foundation stories, are interesting places around which to frame a project that examines the dynamics of emplacement and displacement in a world of movement.

Somalis are often pictured to represent a double sense of movement: With around sixty per cent of the population organised along nomadic, non-sedentary clan-structures, identifying a place of ‘original’ territorial and cultural belonging takes on an entirely new meaning. With nomadic pastoralism and trade as the main forms of livelihood, mobility has been a crucial element for the Somali-speaking region over many centuries. In traditional stories and oral history accounts, migration is narrated as central to Somaliness itself. In these stories, Somalis speak of their migration from Aden to the
Horn of Africa about one thousand years ago, but also of migratory movements within the country (Kleist 2004: 2; Lewis 1999: 21-23). Thirty years of war have led to the movement of a large number of Somalis all over the world. Ever since the breakdown of the military government of Siyaad Barre in 1991, Somalia has been without a central government. Warlordism, famine and ethnic conflict have turned more than one million people into refugees (UNHCR 2013). Because of the (historical and present) importance of migratory movement in the lives of Somalis, many scholars have highlighted the ways mobility determines questions of identity and belonging (for example: Griffiths 2002; Montclos 2003; Fink-Nielsen, Hansen & Kleist 2004; Kroner 2005; Al-Sharmani 2006; Horst 2007).

In Australia, a nation of migrants that was built on the back of the violent displacement of its indigenous inhabitants, the search for an understanding of emplacement also needs to dig deep. It needs to move beyond the discursive layers that liken displacement to ‘others’, or to a state of ‘refugeeness’, but fail to grasp its impact on the here and now – and perhaps also on ‘us’. For while Australia likes to celebrate itself as an immigrant nation, the question of who is allowed in and who has to stay out, who can lay claim to the place and who can’t, is highly contested. Australia is amongst the few countries worldwide committed to resettling a substantial number of refugees living in protracted situations every year, but the question of who of the 15.2 million refugees worldwide is ‘deserving’ of resettlement in Australia has become a highly politicised issue. Forced migrants who cannot or do not want to await the highly unlikely chance of being amongst the one per cent selected for resettlement by the UNHCR every year and take charge of their situations by coming to Australia (be it on leaky boats or by plane on tourist visas) and apply for asylum onshore, are portrayed as security threats and as ‘queue jumpers’ who take away places from the ‘deserving’.

That Somalis were increasingly permitted to immigrate and that Halima, Mohamed and Omar found their way here, was the result of a complex set of political processes. It was only from the 1990s onwards that a shift in policy focus allowed for the resettlement of refugees from the Horn of Africa, most of whom settled in the state of Victoria, specifically in and around Melbourne. The 2011 census showed the number of Somalia-born living in Victoria to be 3061, an increase of almost seventeen per cent to the census figures from 2006 (ABS 2011). Yet, while over the past thirty years Melbourne
has become home to a growing community of Somalis and while it is a group that has attracted much media-attention (specifically since 9/11), in terms of numbers that community remains comparatively small.

The two main places this thesis moves in and around and through and with, it seems, are inextricably linked through their very displacements. - Halima’s and Omar’s stories, however, suggest otherwise. While born in Somalia, neither of them lived the life of a nomad, not in Somalia, and not during the many years they spent on the move, looking for a place to settle down. Although both were admitted to Australia on humanitarian grounds, neither of them regarded themselves to be refugees. Refugeeness, Omar often told me, was nothing more than an obstacle, an extra weight that kept dragging people down. From the very first time I met Omar, he told me that Australia was his home. When he came to Melbourne, there were only a handful of Somalis in the city. He arrived in 1989, shortly before the outbreak of the civil war in Somalia. Like Mohamed, he left the country out of a combination of an adventurous spirit and fear that the already precarious political situation would deteriorate. In Australia, Omar studied international development and married a Somali woman from Mogadishu. Together with their five children they live in Hopper’s Crossing, an outer suburb about thirty kilometres south-west of Melbourne’s centre. With the outbreak of the war in Somalia, Omar managed to resettle some of his family members through the Australian government’s humanitarian program. His elderly mother, his sister and his brother’s children now all live in close proximity to his house in Melbourne.

Melbourne is where Omar locates his home now – and he invests all his time and effort to shape the place in ways that will allow him and fellow Somalis to become an accepted part of it. After years of struggle to find employment and watching many of his highly qualified Somali friends getting turned down time and again, Omar founded an NGO, Horn-Afrik, an employment, training and advocacy organisation. Unemployment among Somalis in Melbourne is very high: in 2006, the unemployment rate among Somalis in Victoria was 32.2 per cent (ABS 2006).¹ Omar has received government funding to assess the situation of men from the Horn of Africa and develop strategies to involve them in the job market (see Farah 2007; 2010). At the same time, he also works as a freelance interpreter, translating Somali documents into English, or

¹ Detailed data from the 2011 census are yet to be published by the Australian Bureau of Statistics.
announcements to the community by government bodies into Somali. For his ability to articulate some of his community’s problems, but also for his considerate nature, he has become a well-respected elder and spokesperson within the wider community of Somalis in Melbourne.

Like Omar, Halima is also actively involved in making the Somali community feel at home in Melbourne. She arrived in Australia ten years ago with three of her children and her adopted son. Many Somalis know her as one of the few female members of parliament at the time of Siyaad Barre’s socialist government. With the collapse of the regime, Halima fled Mogadishu – an exodus that would lead her through many different countries and finally to the United Arab Emirates, where she stayed for twelve years. In 2003, her sister, who had been resettled to Australia ten years earlier, succeeded with her application to bring Halima and her children to Melbourne. With her husband and her three children, Halima lives in Maidstone in the city’s west, where many Somalis have settled. Over the past ten years, she has developed a strong sense of connection to her suburb, an area that is often talked about in terms of its shortcomings. Maidstone and the surrounding suburbs of West Footscray and Braybrook house a high number of socio-economically disadvantaged people and are often portrayed as conflict-ridden and unsafe. All these problems, however, don’t keep Halima from loving this place. Soon after her arrival in Melbourne she began to look for ways to help and strengthen the Somali community in her corner of the city. Almost double the age of her fellow students, she studied community development and welfare. It was her way, she said, of gaining the officially recognised skills she needed to support the Somali community. Once a week, Halima works for a multicultural children’s playgroup. She has also set up a small group of Somali women who run the canteen in a school in Kensington, a suburb close to where she lives, and organises sewing classes for African women.

Without anticipating the details of the stories that form the heart of this thesis, these brief profiles of Halima and Omar and the places in which they are located already foreshadow some of the dynamics. The effort Halima and Omar invest in making Melbourne their home suggests that it is not their experience of varying forms of displacement but rather their relentless struggle for emplacement that links them. These movements towards emplacement underscore Tim Ingold’s suggestion that life is a movement of opening, not closing. Rather than getting stuck in a state of inescapable
displacement, Halima’s and Omar’s narratives speak for the power of the story to move beyond these limitations. Life, Ingold (2011: 4) writes, “just keeps on going, finding a way through the myriad of things that form, persist and break up in its currents”. It is exactly this, human life in its openness, in all its conditions and potentials, that forms my interest in anthropology. It is within a similar vein that the tensions between people’s need for attachment and boundedness, on the one side, and movement and openness, on the other, mark the main threads that run through this thesis. These threads were spun by Halima and Omar’s stories and wove their way into my thinking. In order to unravel these strings that spin their webs through so much of what is at stake in this thesis, I will dedicate the next pages to outlining the very ‘field’ that constitutes its main threads.
2.

MAPPING THE FIELD

The task of mapping a field within which to situate this thesis brings me back to issues of place. On the one hand, it raises the question of how my focus on the interconnectedness of displacement and emplacement is located within a wider landscape of anthropological readings of place and space. On the other hand, to speak of the very emplacement of my research as a field almost immediately raises a set of complex questions about the topos of research – if not of thinking itself.

If a field is a distinct location, a specific corner of the world, why then not simply designate things by their name? If a field really aims to hint at the specificity of the encounter between a certain people and a scholar through a very specific form of social research, why is there a need to map such a meeting within the clear-cut boundaries of a field? Doesn’t that cut short the social relationships, the stories and shared movements that form and transform the ethnographer as well as the people she set out to study – and with it what had been thought of as the field in the first place?

To restrict my thesis both within the boundedness of the field as a distinct locale and as a site of investigation seems impossible. If I were to map out the site where my fieldwork took place, my field would not have much in common with the ethnographic field in the traditional sense of the term: Rather than going on a journey to study ‘a people’ in their home-environment, my research only moved within the realms of two people and their lives. Not only are their original home-places far away, but the fact that they have been transformed, if not destroyed, by decades of violence complicates the concept of home as rooted in place. If I conceptualised the field as something that was already there before I set out to find my way through it, I would be building my thesis on a fortress.

When I left my home-place in Austria in 2009 and came to Melbourne to write my PhD, I had provisional and diffuse ideas about the field. Having written my master’s thesis on the experiences of two Somali refugees in Italian detention camps and having established close friendships with them, I wanted to extend my research on Somalis in
the diaspora. I also knew that I wanted to work with only a small number of people. The first stage of my MA research had involved interviewing a large number of refugees; then, I had become troubled by the process of interviewing people who had survived weeks of walking through the desert, harrowing violence by the Libyan police and dangerous passages on leaky boats, and many of whom were still living precariously on the margins of Italian society. I was meant to elicit *information*, while my interviewees really wanted to share *stories* with me. On account of these experiences and my move to Australia, my *field* had a place (Melbourne) and a direction (life stories), but it did not yet contain the people, stories, the ideas and encounters that would make it come alive.

While my research *took place* in Melbourne, Halima, Mohamed and Omar, in telling me their stories, moved the field beyond our immediate location and towards places they had left behind, but which, despite all, hadn’t left them yet. Through their stories, these memory places were reawakened; they came back to life and in the moment of the telling and listening often felt present and formed a lively part of the *here* and *now*. This *here* and *now* could be in Halima’s living room, with her daughters Sagal and Sahra pottering around the house and joining us every now and then. This *here* and *now* could also be in Omar’s small office at the ground level of a twenty-odd-storey housing commission flat in Melbourne’s inner suburb of Carlton, the photo of his children on top of the filing cabinet, always making them feel present too, like silent observers of the stories their father told me. Sometimes this *here* and *now* was at a Somali wedding or fundraising Halima or Omar had invited me to join, or in a mall in Footscray, where Halima and I were looking for herbs that smelled of Mogadishu. Sometimes, this *here* and *now* was in an email from Mohamed, ‘the nomad’, sending me photos from Tokyo or Abu Dhabi. Or, on one of Mohamed’s visits to Melbourne, this *here* and *now* could take the shape of a walk through the very mall I had strolled through with Halima, the ‘Somali mall’, a place that, as he told me, made him feel ‘like at home’ – home in Somalia, and not home *here*, where we were walking and talking.

So how to think of the field I am attempting to map out here? Alongside which boundaries or limitations does it constitute itself as *something*? What other fields does it relate itself to? Where, in the end, can it be *placed*?
The Topos of the Field

The question of the whereness of the ethnographic field is complex and needs to be spelled out in more detail, as it is intimately linked to notions of place. In anthropology, the question of the topos of the ethnographic field has been discussed intensively over the last two decades by many different writers and from many different angles (for example: Gupta & Ferguson 1997a/b; Olwig & Hastrup 1997; Sissons 1999; Turton 2004; Coleman & Collins 2006; Hastrup 2010). They tried to critique the way the field had been thought of previously – a self-imagination, which, although deeply rooted in place, didn’t take it very seriously.

A famous line in the introduction to Malinowski’s Argonauts of the Western Pacific, a book that lay the grounds for anthropology as a ‘fieldwork science’, has much to say about the discipline’s strong, yet ambiguous and often unarticulated, connection to place: “Imagine yourself suddenly set down surrounded by all your gear, alone on a tropical beach close to a native village, while the launch or dinghy that has brought you sails away out of sight.” (Malinowski 1932: 4)

“Imagine yourself”, Malinowski tells his readers, and thereby invites them to join him in a timeless landscape that seems to mirror the people that inhabit it. At the same time, Malinowski’s “Imagine yourself” invites the readers to join him on a journey that has taken him away from the familiar and known hereness of home and towards the distant, exotic thereness of a tropical island-world.2 The ‘island-world’, an unnamed village somewhere in the Western Pacific’s Trobriand Islands, is where the ‘natives’ seem to have their ‘proper’ place. At the same time, the remoteness of the island, the strenuous effort it took to get there, and the lonely researcher, who was thrown into the unknown and watches his last connection to home sail out of sight, map the anthropologist into his proper position, too. As Arjun Appadurai (1988a: 16) points out in his critique of the ethnographic fieldwork tradition, the field of the classical anthropologist is defined by his own voluntary displacement, while those he sets out to study are pushed into the position of the involuntarily localised ‘other’. Malinowski’s introductory notes suggest that the people he had come to study had their proper place in the ‘native village’, but

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2 Given that during Malinowski’s lifetime the place where he was born and grew up (Krakow in Poland), underwent epochal political, social and cultural changes, and given that he spent most of his professional life in between England and the US, the question where this ‘home’ was actually located is challenging.
that it may in fact have been the anthropologist who was in desperate need of the mappable and calculable boundaries of the ‘terrains’, ‘regions’, ‘areas’, ‘landscapes’, ‘environments’, ‘centres’, or ‘peripheries’ he had set out to study. For without the ‘native’s’ mappable position and the anthropologist’s displacement, what is it that defines (and confines) the field?

Before anthropologists came to ask this question, however, generations of ethnographers followed in Malinowski’s footsteps, celebrating their journeys in and out of the ‘field’ as a rite of passage, an initiation ritual into the academic ranks (Gupta & Ferguson 1997a: 16). With his famous introductory lines, Malinowski created an image of the lone, white, male fieldworker, living among native villagers – an image which had the power to form the discipline’s self-imagination to such a degree that George Stocking (1992: 218) has described it as an “archetype”. Within this vein, culture came to be seen as something fixed into a specific territory, and place became merely a tool for poetic reminiscences, or a backdrop of ethnographic accounts. In Australia, anthropologists have written about the meaning of landscape and place for its ‘nomadic’ Aboriginal inhabitants, but even these accounts didn’t manage to escape the imagination of the timelessness and rootedness of people in place (see for example: Munn 1970, 1973; Strehlow 1965, 1969, 1970). So while place has played a fundamental role from the beginning of anthropology as a discipline, it did so more as a framing device. As a concept, however, place was not critically scrutinised for a long time.

With the growing importance of global mobility and with the critique of the colonial nature of the ethnographic field tradition, the simple dualism of ‘them’ being ‘there’ and ‘us’ being ‘here’ came under scrutiny. The end of colonialism, the increasing number of ‘them’ being among ‘us’ and the problematisation of this ‘us’ threw anthropology’s self-conception into question. Key publications from the early 1980s, such as Edward Said’s Orientalism (1979) and Benedict Anderson’s Imagined Communities (1983), as well as the turn towards interpretation and reflexivity, led the discipline to rethink its traditional placement within the field – and also within the wider world.

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3 As Joan Vincent (1990) and Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (1997) have pointed out, while cultural diffusionists have largely been rejected for their use of speculative grand schemes and their lack of face-to-face encounters with the people they were writing about, they were also concerned with the rapid and destructive changes imperialism brought forth and with larger political and economic contexts – themes Malinowski and his followers of the fieldwork tradition ignored. While these accounts could, to some extent, now be read as a first move towards accepting a more dynamic and changeable understanding of culture, I suggest that they didn’t, in any way, contribute to a clearer understanding of place or (and even less so) the lived experience of place.
From the early 1990s, and inspired by the spatial turn in human geography, a number of anthropologists began to explicitly tackle concepts of space and place. In a special edition of the journal *Cultural Anthropology* on “Place and Voice” in 1988 a group of scholars gathered for the first time to question the way place had been dealt with. Well-known scholars such as Arjun Appadurai, Paul Dresch, James W. Fernandez, George Marcus, Renato Rosaldo and Marilyn Strathern contributed to the edition. They all focused on the problem of locating the place of the field in anthropological writing, or, as Appadurai (1988a: 16) puts it, “the problem of the culturally defined locations to which ethnographies refer”.

Following on from these first discussions on the intersection of place and representation there emerged a distinct group of thinkers who came to be the face of the spatial turn in anthropology, a turn that unfolded across the social sciences and humanities (Warf & Arias 2009: 2). These thinkers include Arjun Appadurai, who kicked off the debate on the boundedness of the ethnographic field and who subsequently studied mobile and global phenomena (Appadurai 1988a/b; 1996); Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, whose critique of the location of the anthropological fieldwork tradition lay the groundwork for an investigation of the links between power and place in anthropology (Gupta & Ferguson 1992; 1997 a/b); Margaret Rodman, who in taking a “hard look” at places, showed them as politicised, culturally relative, historically specific, multiple social constructions (Rodman 1992); Liisa Malkki, who in studying refugees threw anthropological ways of creating intimate and ‘natural’ links between people and places into question (Malkki 1992; 1995a/b; 1997); and Renato Rosaldo, who voiced an early critique about the way anthropologists, in constructing a field, had come to ‘map’ certain problems or themes onto specific places and peoples (Rosaldo 1988). While the body of work they produced was diverse and can’t be subsumed under the label of ‘anthropology of space’, it signalled the beginning of a new focus (Ward 2003: 86).

This move towards spatiality can be seen as a continuation and consequence of debates from the 1980s, when the relations between the researcher and her subjects were pushed into the spotlight. Contributors to the *Writing Culture* debates scrutinised ethnographies for the uncritical reproduction of colonial fantasies. The reflexive turn, which had led some to suggest the discipline’s reformation into a form of cultural critique (Marcus & Fischer 1986), shed light on the construction of otherness in ethnographic writing. Some
anthropologists went a step further by also putting the spatial dimensions of the field into question. In *Culture, Power, Place*, Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, two key proponents of the spatial turn, proposed that cultural criticism itself remained caught in the assumption of an original separation between the ‘us’ of the fieldworker and the ‘them’ of those in question. This assumption, they pointed out, needed to be seen as a direct result of the movement’s uncritically spatialised understanding of cultural difference: “The foundation of cultural critique – a dialogic relation with an ‘other’ culture that yields a critical viewpoint on ‘our culture’ – assumes an already existing world of many different, distinct ‘cultures’, and an unproblematic distinction between ‘our own society’ and an ‘other’ society” (Gupta and Ferguson 1992a: 13). In turn, the new focus on space in the 1990s paved the way for the discipline to rethink its concept of culture.

The debates around the position and location of the anthropologist in the field led to changes in the way fieldwork was approached methodologically. In his contribution to Coleman and Collin’s collection of essays on the location of the field in contemporary anthropology, Ulf Hannerz reflects on these shifting approaches (Hannerz 2006). In classical anthropology, the field was a matter of “being there”, or an “expatriate anthropology”, as Hannerz puts it, but now this notion was to be complemented by the idea of “anthropology at home”. But soon anthropology at home was criticised for “studying down”, which led to the proposal that anthropologists should also “study up”. At the same time, some anthropologists began to focus their studies on people close to their own backgrounds; they labelled this approach “studying sideways”. When the construction of the field was understood to involve webs of relations between actors, institutions and discourses, the notion of “studying through” began to evolve. Hannerz proposes that nowadays anthropologists study here or there, up or down, through or sideways, and, referring to the importance of past and future, they also study “backwards and forwards” (Hannerz 2006: 24).

In stating that my thesis cannot be related to a field in the classical ethnographic sense of the term, I am not positioning it outside the boundaries of the anthropological discipline. Rather, these boundaries have shifted and transformed to such a degree that by now the topos of the field almost needs to be looked for in its very displacement. Yet, to think of my thesis as grounded in a free-floating or placeless ethnographic
encounter would not do justice to the importance of immediate physical and material settings on social life and thus to the way research takes shape. To speak of a fieldless ethnography would therefore go too far and deny the power and strength of being-in-place.

The ethnographic field that Omar, Mohamed, Halima and I were moving this research through mustn’t be thought of as confined by boundary-lines in the way one would imagine the lines that mark the edge of a sportsground. I suggest imagining it as the conglomerate of a set of specific places, confined not by a border, but by a horizon. A horizon, Martin Heidegger stresses, much like the boundary in the classical Greek sense of the term (peras), is not the point at which something stops. Instead, the boundary “is that from which something begins its presencing” (Heidegger 1975: 154). To think of the field as confined by the openness of the horizon, which allows for things to be moved, formed and understood rather than incarcerated, is to allow for movement to be an intrinsic part of it. At the same time, however, such an understanding mustn’t lose sight of the very physical settings from where things take place or, as Heidegger puts it, “wo etwas sein Wesen beginnt” (from which something begins its presencing).

In thinking about my thesis within the settings of a topos, enclosed along the line of a horizon, I am paradoxically moving within and beyond the field as it is currently being thought of in anthropological debates. For the spatial turn in anthropology had two core effects: On the one hand it allowed for a profound problematisation of the field as the pre-given locus for anthropological research, the settings of which I have attempted to outline. Following on from Appadurai’s (1988b: 37) suggestion that much ethnographic writing tends to “incarcerate natives” in places, a number of anthropologists began to concentrate on the constructedness of the field and look for alternative methods – methods that would not, by default, root people in places (Gupta & Ferguson 1992; 1997 a/b; Malkki 1992; Olwig & Hastrup 1997). As a result, anthropologists began to loosen the fixation and boundedness of the field and let movement become an intrinsic part of their self-understanding.

The spatial turn also opened the doors for a new theoretical and empirical focus on the connections between space, power and identity. Directly related to the project of dislocating the anthropological field, some anthropologists opted for a close look at the
production of space through questions of power, domination and territoriality (for example: Bammer 1994; Malkki 1995a; Appadurai 1996; Castells 1996; Hannerz 1996). Inspired by philosophers such as Michel DeCerteau (1984), Michel Foucault (1986) and Henri Lefebvre (1991), who wrote about the use of space as a technique of power and social control, anthropologists began to question the meaning of place. They called for a change in focus from stable, rooted and mappable identities to fluid, transitory and migratory movements. With the re-conceptualization of spatiality, anthropology was thus “set in motion” (Strasser 2001). The result of this development was the acceptance of displacement as the new trope through which anthropologists came to look at the world. Another consequence, however, was the neglect of, if not total disregard for, place as a concept worthy of anthropological investigation.

Because this focus played a major role in the way space and place have come to be dealt with in anthropology, and because it can be seen as the premise from which much of my thinking in this thesis departed, I continue mapping the field by outlining some of the main ideas and debates that delineate it.

When Trees Became Boring

Our age has often been characterised in terms of relentless movement and displacement. In The Origins of Totalitarianism, Hannah Arendt (1971: vii) describes the physiognomy of the twentieth century as typified by “homelessness on an unprecedented scale” and “rootlessness to an unprecedented depth”. Exploring this feeling of rootlessness as a theoretical opportunity to move beyond rigid and exclusionary political realities, many postmodern thinkers have described themselves and their work in terms of borderless movement. In this vein, Ian Chambers (1994: 14) suggests that in “the extensive and multiple worlds of the modern city we, too, become nomads”, and in the same spirit Zygmunt Bauman (1992: 693) stresses that we live today “in a nomadic world, in the universe of migration”. Being in the postmodern sense, Angelika Bammer (1994: xii) claims, is by definition “to be an Other: displaced”.

The uprootedness often connected with forced migration has led some intellectuals to celebrate the refugee as paradigmatic for a time of deterritorialisation (see Deleuze & Guattari 1986). Refugees have come to be the symbolic figures of an age of movement.
and fluctuation. They challenge established notions of a “national order of things” (Malkki 1995b), of a world that can be neatly mapped and of cultures that are deeply rooted in places that ‘belong’ to them. Within these lines, the refugee has come to be celebrated as a figure that embodies a sense of nomadic movement and resists any form of categorization. In anthropology, the symbolic power of displacement has come to be of paradigmatic importance for the way place is conceptualised. From the 1980s onwards, and with the growing acceptance that the idea of studying people in their stable, ‘local’ environments didn’t meet the reality of the encounters ethnographers had in the field, the number of publications on refugees and migrants increased. By pushing internal displacement, the lives of refugees and the politics of humanitarian aid into the spotlight, Elizabeth Colson (1971), Peter Loizos (1982) and Barbara Harrell-Bond (1986) paved the way for a growing interest in displacement in anthropology. In focusing on “moving targets”, as Arjun Appadurai and Carol Breckenridge (1989) put it, anthropologists have attempted to move beyond the discursive conventions that see people as rooted in place and describe the loss of home as an incurable ailment.

In many ways, Liisa Malkki’s *Purity and Exile* paved the way for this new reading of displacement. Malkki explores how the lived experience of exile shapes the construction of national identity and historicity amongst two groups of Hutu refugees living in different settings in Tanzania (Malkki 1995a). While one group lives in a strictly organised, isolated refugee camp, the other lives in an open township on Lake Tanganyika. Malkki shows that the two different spatial settings create very distinct ways of dealing with questions of identity, history and national belonging. While the camp refugees regard themselves as a nation in exile and refuse to put down roots, the town refugees do not construct such a distinct, collective identity. They refuse to define themselves collectively as ‘Hutu refugees’ – instead, they establish ways of assimilating and deploying multiple identities. Malkki stresses that in refusing to be pinned down the town refugees dismantle the national metaphysics and challenge cultural and national essentialisms: “Theirs were creolised, rhizomatic identities – changing and situational rather than essential and moral” (Malkki 1992: 36). Looking at place from what Malkki labelled an “anti-sedentarist” point of view and through the lens of displacement enables her to show it as a construction, as something that continuously changes and needs to be closely linked to wider political and historical processes. Moving away from static and
essentialist understandings of space and place, the town refugees symbolise the idea that people are more mobile than ever. Malkki shows them as active agents whose rhizomic identities allow them to move beyond the incarceration of ‘natives’ or ‘citizens’ in places.

The metaphor of the root has become replaced by the image of the rhizome – a stem that is capable of producing the shoot and root systems of a new plant. In Capitalism and Schizophrenia, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari develop the idea of the rhizome as a means of working against the organisational structure of the root-tree system which looks for the original source of things. Being “rhizomorphous” means to produce stems and filaments that seem to be roots, but put them to strange new uses. Rhizomes, then, stand for a way of positioning ourselves in the world that moves beyond the immovability of the image of a tree setting roots. “We’re tired of trees,” Deleuze and Guattari (1987:15) write. “We should stop believing in trees, roots, and radicles. They’ve made us suffer too much. All of arborescent culture is founded on them, from biology to linguistics. Nothing is beautiful or loving or political aside from underground stems and aerial roots, adventitious growths and rhizomes.”

Inspired by this ‘treeless’, rhizomic imagination of our age, many anthropologists focused on movement, transnational networks and globalization. Within such a time of movement, Arjun Appadurai (1996: 52) stresses, the task of ethnography becomes the unravelling of one key question: “What is the nature of locality as a lived experience in a globalized, deterritorialized world?” Thinking beyond rigid national and territorial boundaries and the search for other, more flexible or nomadic ways of being has not just become a theoretical task, but also a political project. In a world that continues to be interspersed with exclusionary practices, anthropological debates have moved their attention away from roots and towards global space or global flows.

Manuel Castells (1989, 1996), for example, speaks of the “network society”, in which the “space of flows” begins to overtake the “space of places”. In such a society everything is ordered through flows – of goods, of people, of services and of geographic regions. And in such a society, Castells argues, places cease to exist, because their inner meanings become absorbed by the network. In a similar vein, Arjun Appadurai (1996) speaks of “global ethnoscapes” to describe the slippery and nonlocalised social,
territorial, and cultural reproduction of group identity in an age of globalisation. According to Zygmunt Bauman, this age of globalization can be characterised as a “liquid modernity”. He imagines the stage of modernity we are currently living through in terms of fluids which constantly change their shape and can neither bind time nor space. In such a world of fluids, Bauman (2000: 2) argues, places lose their inner meaning because after all, spaces only exist “for a moment” until they change shape again.

The shift to seeing contemporary people as “migrants of identity” (Rapport & Dawson 1998), as marked by the fluidity of time and space, has led to the loss of place as a metaphor for identity and culture (Escobar 2001: 146-147). Rather than being bounded to a timeless and unmoving place, people are now thought of as continuously moving through a flexible, open-ended and contested space. Humans and their lives have been set in motion; they have become space travellers - to such a degree that Slavoj Žižek posed the question of whether we are actually still living in a world. In an age in which subjectivity is celebrated as rootless, migratory, nomadic, and hybrid, Žižek argues, the links that attach the mind to its fixed material embodiment seem to have become replaced by the logic of the computer that allows us to migrate between endless possibilities (Žižek 2007).

The spatial turn in anthropology quite literally did what the term announces: It led to a radical shift towards space – and thereby banned place. The de-essentialisation of place was crucially important for the re-formulation of a discipline wary of being complicit in the creation of exclusionary boundaries and practices. What, then, happened to place within the fluid space of a postmodern world, in a world, in which trees have become boring and anthropologists look at the earth from outer space? In the wake of a deterritorialised dream of (non)belonging, we all seem to have become displaced. But are we really all refugees, as philosopher Giorgio Agamben suggested in his famous essay (Agamben 1995)? Where would this leave people like Halima and Omar, who came to Australia as so-called humanitarian entrants, yet refuse to see themselves as refugees? If displacement hits the nerve of our time, how, then, is it constituted – not as a theoretical and analytical category, but as lived and thought of in people’s everyday lives?
The persistence of places in Halima’s and Omar’s stories and everyday lives moved my thinking away from an anthropology that locates humans in the blurry vastness of space. Their stories led me to move back towards a – albeit re-conceptualised – place-based lens. While cherishing the insight that places cannot be seen as bounded, immobile territories, this perspective doesn’t come to the conclusion that place must be disregarded altogether. This perspective is informed by the recognition that as place continues to be of such importance in people’s lives, anthropologists cannot bypass it by creating ever-tightening theoretical categories. My perspective on place can be read within the lines of phenomenological thinkers like Martin Heidegger, Edward Casey, Jeff Malpas and Gaston Bachelard, who, in focusing on lived experience, have all embraced the idea that place is prior to all things. My thesis can also be read within the context of a wider anthropological revalidation of place (see: Weiner 1991; Hirsch & O’Hanlon 1995; Basso 1996; Feld & Basso 1996; Rumsey & Weiner 2001). In her assessment of theoretical streams within the discipline, Kirsten Hastrup notes that anthropology is at the verge of what she calls a “topographic turn”, which will lead to a new alertness over the materiality of the world and over the actual space in which people dwell: “It is not possible to ‘think away’ the actual geographical location of social life; lives are always grounded.” (Hastrup 2005: 145)⁴

This thought finally leads me towards the perspective that has come to frame, shape and place my approach. And because this approach is inextricably tied to the power and dynamics of storytelling, I illustrate it through a story.

**Topology of Being**

In 1981, waiting for a connecting flight to Melbourne after disembarking in Singapore from his first-ever flight, Mohamed was struck by the strangeness of the place. Stepping outside the airport building, he could feel the heat clinging to his skin. “I felt the wind and the humidity,” he told me. “And I never knew what humidity was – all these little things you get used to. Where I grew up there was no humidity because it was dry in the morning and in the afternoon it got cooler. So to me, I couldn’t understand: what was

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⁴ Eight years after the publication of Hastrup’s article, the signs aren’t pointing to a fully-fledged shift from space to place, although a growing number of scholars are adopting a more balanced approach that moves beyond viewing the world purely in terms of transnational, deterritorialised flows or spaces.
this? Why am I feeling sticky?’ Laughing, he added that upon leaving Somalia, even supposedly little things like the sunset reminded him of the fact that he was somewhere else. Looking at the sun going down in Singapore, he was so overwhelmed by its size that he thought he must have come to the end of the world. ‘I guess that was because I was close to the equator,’ he explained. ‘Anyway, this thing was huge and red, and all this comes to me when I think about it now.’

This story, which Mohamed told me one day when we met to talk about his photographs, has much to say about the perspectives on place, displacement and storytelling that have come to frame this thesis. When Mohamed stepped out of the world of the airport, the place immediately made itself felt. Through the humidity on his skin and the wind in the air he encountered some of its features and habits – habits he didn’t yet grasp. At the same time as the place made itself felt, it also created an utter sense of displacement within him. *All these little things you get used to* but were so strange and unknown made him realise how much he had been part and parcel of another place, a place he had left behind. And all these ways of being – the being-in-place, as well as the being-out-of-place – were so strong that thirty years later, sitting in a Melbourne café, they came back to him. Mohamed’s story suggests that place doesn’t cease to exist, even if it is experienced as a sense of deep and utter disruption (or displacement). It is always there, where we are. Because we can’t escape its presence, it plays into the way we see and engage with the world. We come to the world and keep returning to it, Edward Casey suggests, as already placed there. Humans, he stresses, are always already in place, never not emplaced (Casey 2000: 17-18). So what, then, is place – or the *in* of being-in-place?

Although the spatial turn in anthropology, as well as in the social sciences and humanities in general, set out to re-conceptualise space and place, it didn’t make the two terms any clearer. Trying to grasp the concept of place after the spatial turn, Edward Relph (2008: 5) notes, is “like walking into the aftermath of an academic explosion”. While there has been much talk about place, the focus has tended to be not so much on place itself, but on the effects of place and on the social and political processes of which place is believed to be an effect. With its main interest in power dynamics, space is often seen as the unarticulated assumption of a neutral and pre-given tabula rasa onto which the particularities of culture and history become inscribed, and of which place is
the result (Casey 2000: 14). Yet if, as in Mohamed’s case, even the stickiness of humidity on the skin, a sunset, or stones on a path can have such a strong effect, how then can we think of this world as an indifferent space, as a placeless universe? Doesn’t such a view also preclude the intimacy of all the little things you get used to – and with it the possibilities for people like Mohamed, Halima and Omar to feel a meaningful part of anywhere again? Or, as Peter Wynn Kirby (2009: 4) puts it, don’t human lives “believe the cold, empty, passionless rationality of space”? 

Rather than using displacement as a metaphor for a sense of alienation from society, the stories that form the heart of this thesis show the different ways people actively make sense of new, left behind or lost places. In focusing on the felt, experienced and storied dimensions of place, rather than reducing it to its analytical and structural properties, this thesis can thus be read as a perspective on displacement that attempts to “get back into place”.

In Getting Back into Place (1993) and The Fate of Place (1997a) Edward Casey sets out to write the importance of place back into philosophy. He opposes the predominance that space and time have come to occupy in modern and postmodern Western thinking. “I shall accord to place a position of renewed respect by specifying its power to direct and stabilize us, to memorialize and identify us, to tell us who and what we are in terms of where we are (as well as where we are not)“, he writes (Casey 1993: xv). Casey’s attempt to write the body back into place and place back into theoretical consciousness offered an important entry point for my own understanding of place.

Building much of his work on Gaston Bachelard’s phenomenology of intimate spaces in The Poetics of Space, Casey adopts the idea of topo-analysis, which, for Bachelard, is “the systematic psychological study of the sites of our intimate lives” (Bachelard 1994: 8). In examining the intimate and often unconscious, dream-like experience of the houses we inhabited (or still inhabit), from their cellars to their attics, from their furniture to their doors, Bachelard lays open a topology of the self. This topology is close to what Martin Heidegger called a “Topologie des Seins” (topology of being) (see Heidegger 1977: 32; 2002: 84 and 2003: 41). It hints at being-in-the-world as something that is always emplaced. The links between self, place and experience are so crucial that throughout this thesis these three thinkers – Casey, Bachelard and Heidegger – play an
essential role. They have informed my conceptualisation of place as something that is not rigidly shielded off or enclosed, but as something that is essentially open – something of and in the world. While place is closely connected to being, this doesn’t suggest that it is static – for being itself is always moving, always a form of becoming.

The idea that place and being are intimately connected, yet not in ways that exclude the possibility for movement and change, is discussed by Martin Heidegger. While Being and Time features sections on the spatiality of being (die Räumlichkeit des Daseins), the idea of place is not spelled out in detail and priority is given to existentiality and temporality. In his later work, however, Heidegger abandons this position and begins to focus on the topological character of Dasein (being) instead (Malpas 2012: 16). It is a shift I found important for my own understanding of place, as it emphasises the connection of Sein (being) with Da (here). Being, this suggests, is intimately interwoven with the textures and dynamics of place.

This turn towards place shouldn’t be regarded as a reactionary turn backwards. Looking into the historical roots of the word Raum (space), Heidegger points out its close relationship to räumen (clearing-away).5 “Clearing-away brings forth the free, the openness for man’s settling and dwelling”, he writes (Heidegger 1973: 5). Rather than thinking of space as empty and of place as unmovable and static, our continuous acts of arranging, clearing and what Heidegger calls einräumen (making-room), indicate the changing and essentially open character of place: “First, making-room admits something. It lets openness hold sway which, among other things, grants the appearance of things present to which human dwelling sees itself consigned. On the other hand, making-room prepares for things the possibility to belong to their relevant whither and, out of this, to each other.” (Heidegger 1973: 6) Heidegger’s idea of place not as an imprisonment, but as something that reaches out into the world whilst not losing its possibility as a dwelling for humans in the midst of things, has shaped my understanding of emplacement. Throughout Omar’s and Halima’s stories, place features as something that contains and sets free at the same time, as something that is always moving, or “on

5 The German word Raum has very different connotations to the English term ‘space’. The German term doesn’t only mean ‘space’, it also means ‘place’ and it is related to the English word ‘room’. As Kenneth Olwig (2002: 14) points out, the Germanic concept of Raum encompasses “both an enclosed room-like area, defined by the phenomena within it, and an open, infinite and transcendent, absolute space in which things can be located”. Thus, Raum and ‘space’ take on a very different character in English and German, and it is this essential difference that also needs to be taken into consideration when Heidegger, in speaking of place, often relates to vocabulary that hints at space/ Raum.
the way” (unterwegs), as Heidegger (1962: 110) puts it. In their stories the process of taking roots doesn’t take on the suffocating character of immobility. Ghassan Hage, reflecting on his own experience as a migrant in Australia, writes that rootedness shouldn’t too easily be mistaken for a sense of being stuck or immovable. He suggests that many people experience the opposite, “roots often are paradoxically experienced like an extra pair of wings” (Hage 2013: 149).

Human beings are essentially terrestrial beings, they cannot but travel through place. If we accept this thought, then we also need to view displacement differently. Here, I found much inspiration in the work of Tim Ingold (2000; 2009; 2011), perhaps the most outspoken among a number of anthropologists who, in focusing on lived experience, have come to question the notion that place exists in space (for example: Hirsch & O’Hanlon 1995; Feld & Basso 1996; Fortier 1999; Escobar 2001; Englund 2002; Kirby 2009). He suggests that lives are not led inside places, but “through, around, to and from them, from and to places elsewhere” (Ingold 2009: 33). In such a reading, place becomes something particular, yet outward bound, something that has a material, physical presence and is yet open to change. Ingold uses the term “wayfaring” to describe the embodied experience of place. It is as wayfarers, he writes, that human beings inhabit the earth. Human existence is not, as human geographer Christopher Tilley (2004: 25) suggests, place-bound, but rather place-binding (Ingold 2009: 33). Ingold’s wayfarer doesn’t view the world as a surface to be traversed. Her movements form a thread through, rather than across the world, for the wayfarer is a terrestrial being and must travel over land (Ingold 2009: 37).

In framing a topology of being that begins and ends in place, yet in places that are always on the way, the strength of storytelling comes to the fore. It is through stories that people order, characterise, create and overrule places. And it is in places that stories come to life – that they, quite literally, take place. Halima’s and Omar’s stories as well as Mohamed’s photographs allow for a more complex understanding of displacement – one that values and accepts its interconnectedness to emplacement.

It is along these horizons that the architecture of the thesis has taken shape. The core themes of storytelling, emplacement and displacement have become building blocks to the three main chapters. In chapter II, I discuss my epistemological and methodological
groundings. In focusing on the interplay between place, experience and storytelling, I frame the emplacement of my text within phenomenological anthropology. Chapter III focuses on Omar’s life story. Meandering through his stories, it aims to come to an understanding of the importance and complexity of place and emplacement. Chapter IV is built around Halima’s stories. Thinking about the lived meaning of displacement in her story, the links between being in and out of place, past and present, and movement and stagnation come to the fore. While the theme of emplacement runs more strongly through Omar’s stories, and displacement through Halima’s, there is no strict thematic divide between the chapters. The openness of the storytelling approach allows me to stay unterwegs (on the way), even in my writing, and to expose the complex movements, tensions and interrelations between the two phenomena.

Three and a half years ago, when I moved to the other end of the world in order to write about other people’s displacements, I couldn’t have foreseen that this thesis would end up being about people’s continuous movements towards emplacement. It was by being here in Melbourne and with Halima, Mohamed and Omar, and by telling each other stories, that I came to understand the continuous importance of place in their lives. They made me see that even people on the move, whether on the run from war, hunger or destruction, or simply looking for greener pastures elsewhere, do not move through an indifferent space. Rather, they travel through places – and in moving through, shape them and are in turn shaped by them.
Mohamed took this photo while driving through the heart of Mogadishu. The image’s dreamlike mood, its multi-layered perspective, its sense of rhythm and its exceptional framing immediately captivated me. Before knowing the photographer’s account, the image stirred something deep inside me. It told me stories of the faceless people sitting on and in the truck, stories of the dusty roads they were travelling through, stories of their journeys, and stories of the onlooker behind the window of another car, capturing this blink of a moment.

“There are a lot of things you can comment on this,” Mohamed, the ‘onlooker’, explained later, when I asked him what had moved him about that very moment. “First of all what I noticed was that this was no civilian truck. It’s a military truck. Who am I to ask those questions? But if you really asked the proper question than you would have to ask: ‘How comes that these guys are using government property?’ They would say: ‘But what government? Who cares?’ So that’s one level. One can actually say that
things are so chaotic that now these guys can drive a military truck in the middle of the town and nobody even recognises it. Nobody cares. I care, because I can tell!”

Mohamed paused and gave me a knowing smile. He could tell and with him I could see. But who were we to question the habits of a place we didn’t inhabit? Mohamed continued: “That’s one thing. The other thing is the wood it’s carrying. Even now, despite the famine and the lack of rain, they are still cutting down the trees. And then on top there are people sitting, these people are probably traders. So within this image there is so much that summarizes the problem in Somalia: The stealing of the national asset, the national resources, the safety issues, because they are sitting on top, and probably, if you look at the whole picture you might even find some people with guns, also sitting somewhere. So that alone gives us a snapshot of the whole problem.” Mohamed began to laugh at the idea of this snapshot. It contains so many displacements: A truck, stolen from a state whose very existence seems to have become questionable, carrying wood from a mangrove forest that is dying through the middle of a town that has lost its balance. And capturing all these displacements is the eye of the man behind the camera, Mohamed, who remembers the city from times when things were in their proper place.

Yet for the people sitting on top of the truck, life goes on. Somehow, for them, things are in their proper place now, for they deal with the place as it happens. With all the displacements that have led to the disintegration of the place as Mohamed remembers it, to the people who live there it is a reality they have to live and deal with. So who is he to ask them questions about it? For the photographer, the returnee who positions himself strangely within and yet outside, the place depicted becomes something at once alienating and touching. The image captures place in all its imagined, sensed, storied and lived dimensions. At the same time, it gives room to the many displacements that are also part of the photographer’s ways of seeing the place.

And thus the question arises: How to approach place in a way that takes all these layers into account? How to approach it in its lived, sensed, felt density? How to find ways of understanding Dasein in its openness of being here, even if this here is shattered by painful, violent or disorienting events?
II

Born of and into the World
1. THINKING WHAT WE ARE DOING

Walkers of the Everyday

What strikes me as peculiar about Melbourne is the fact that so many birds, instead of flying in the sky or perching in the trees, inhabit the ground. Proudly and confidently they strut on the ground, a world that is fully theirs. Their territories are the open spaces in the large parklands or the backyards where people plant herbs or hold barbecues. I face these tough little creatures, who are fearless even as I step very close to shoo them away, with a mixture of amazement and horror. I encounter them when riding on the bike trail along the Yarra River; they parade on the concrete path, not making the slightest move to get out of my way, so that I feel I have to swing my bike around not to hit them. The way the large black-and-white Australian magpies stare right into my eyes without fluffing off often makes me feel so intimidated that I choose a detour.

In Melbourne I am often asked about my background. Whether ordering a cup of tea, chatting about the weather to the staff at the local bottle store, or responding to someone asking me for directions, my accent stirs up a lot of curiosity. Once I have explained that I moved from Austria to Australia in late 2009 on a scholarship to write my PhD on Somali refugees, I am frequently asked how I like Melbourne. When this happens I am always tempted to talk about the birds and how they remind me of living ‘down under’ (or maybe rather ‘upside down’) every day. I would like to say that even the blueness of the sky and the greyness of the clouds are so typical for Melbourne that they give my being-here a specific texture. But instead, I fall back into the rehearsed everyday tales people like to repeat to reassert each other. “People are friendly here,” I hear myself saying, “It’s easy to settle down as a foreigner in such a multicultural city”.

Yet there is much more to be said about the way I experience Melbourne. By experiencing I do not just mean a way of intellectually making sense of my surroundings; I am also referring to the many layers of seeing, hearing, smelling, sensing, observing and storying the things and people around me.
How to explain what it means to be in place in Melbourne? How to explain the slow process of getting to know a place, of befriending it, of becoming *emplaced*? How to find words for the smells, the web of street names, or the sounds and whispers that have become such an intrinsic part of my emplacement here? And how to convey the timidity that accompanied my first steps through Melbourne, an utter feeling of *strangeness* – as if even my way of walking, the way I chose to step into the world, revealed the fact that I wasn’t part of the wholeness to which everyone else seemed to belong?

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel De Certeau speaks of this wholeness when he thinks about the poetry of looking down at Manhattan from the 110th floor of the World Trade Centre. Looking down from so far above the city conveys a feeling of seeing the whole without its single parts:

> To be lifted to the summit of the World Trade Center is to be lifted out of the city’s grasp. One’s body is no longer claspèd by the streets that turn and return it according to an anonymous law; nor is it possessed, whether as player or played, by the rumble of so many differences and by the nervousness of New York traffic. When one goes up there, he leaves behind the mass that carries off and mixes up in itself any identity of authors or spectators. An Icarus flying above these waters, he can ignore the devices of Daedalus in mobile and endless labyrinths far below. His elevation transfigures him into a voyeur. It puts him at a distance. It transforms the bewitching world by which one was ‘possessed’ into a text that lies before one’s eye. (De Certeau 1984: 92)

Thus, the world turns into a text ready to be read and understood, while the ordinary practitioners of everyday city life are down below, “below the thresholds at which visibility begins”, as De Certeau (1984: 93) puts it. He calls them *Wandersmänner* (walkers)*, whose bodies follow an urban text they write without being able to read it. “It is as though the practices organizing a bustling city were characterized by their blindness,” he notes. “The networks of these moving, intersecting writings compose a manifold story that has neither author nor spectator, shaped out of fragments of trajectories and alterations of spaces: in relation to representations, it remains daily and indefinitely other.” (De Certeau 1984: 93)

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6 De Certeau uses the German term *Wandersmänner* in the French original of the text and likens them to the French *marcheurs* – an interesting decision given that the word isn’t commonly used in German.
When Halima arrived in Melbourne on a winter evening in 2002, she was overwhelmed by the darkness of the city. Upon leaving the airport and driving towards the place that was to become her new home, she felt disoriented and confused by the sea of darkness that surrounded her. In the United Arab Emirates, where she had spent the last twelve years, the streets and buildings were saturated with such dazzling lights that even in the middle of the night there was no real darkness. “So when I came here I thought: ‘What’s going on? This is a developed country, what happened? Why is it so dark?’” Halima said.

Now, years later and drinking cups of sweet Somali tea in the living room of her house in Maidstone, she could share a laugh over the memories of her first encounters with Melbourne. Halima told me that driving through this darkness had made her question whether she had actually arrived in the right place. “I thought I came to the wrong place, that it was not Australia,” she laughed. “And my little adopted son, my nephew who grew up with my kids, he said: ‘Mum, I think we came to the wrong place, it’s not Australia!’” The darkness Halima drove through made the city she had come to live in feel like a sleeping giant. Its breath and aliveness made it palpable but its character, its moods, and its trajectories were kept hidden under a coat of darkness. The silhouettes of the first suburban houses she could see made the order of this place even more ungraspable. “I found that all the houses were small, small, small,” Halima said, “because where I came from in Dubai I was surrounded by highrises. Everything was very strange.”

It was from this feeling of strangeness, from the fear that upon awakening the next day the sleeping giant would turn into an incomprehensible city maze, that Halima’s sister used all her strength to protect her. Sahra, who had arrived in Melbourne years before and already knew the paths and ways of Melbourne, tried to loosen the sense of disorientation by being around her – day and night. “For the first month she was with me,” Halima said. “We were even sleeping in the same bed together.” And, thinking about it for a while she added: “I don’t think I could have survived if my sister hadn’t been here.” It was by tackling the initial incomprehensibility of the city with someone else, by walking and talking through it together, that the feeling of strangeness waned and Halima began to make sense of her surroundings. Beyond the Icarus-look onto the city as a readable text, it was only in connection with others that Halima began to grasp
rather than decipher the different parcels that constitute the wholeness of Melbourne and began to *inhabit* the place she had come to live in socially.

Consider the way clouds in the sky or birds on the ground filter into my way of walking through and perceiving Melbourne. And think of the way Melbourne’s darkness occasioned a feeling of strangeness in Halima, a strangeness that only dissolved by beginning, step by step, to understand the way this place was organised. If the space of the city shapes us at the same time as it is shaped by us, then how can we come to an understanding of the fragile processes that form and shape place into a dwelling? How can we overcome the tension between the way we see, feel and live place and the way we come to conceptualise, think, decipher and read it? For while De Certeau’s observant eye deciphering the smooth wholeness of Manhattan from the top of the World Trade Centre suggests a clear and frictionless way of understanding place intellectually, in everyday life people don’t lift themselves out of the city’s grasp in order to interpret place as a text. Rather, the walkers of the everyday cannot but make sense of the wholeness of a place by walking, feeling, living its manifold stories. Instead of imposing intellectual structures on a phenomenon so deeply embedded in people’s movements through the world, there is a need to attend to the way it is experienced or lived through.

What does this mean for me, the anthropologist, attempting to understand the way people make sense of the places they live in, have left behind, lost, or are moving towards? How to understand the complex dynamics that turned the initial feeling of *strangeness* Halima and I both experienced when taking our first steps through Melbourne into a feeling of familiarity and attachment? Instead of becoming an Icarus, gliding over people’s lives, deciphering the world from the skies above, it seems as if I need to take on the role of a Daedalus, throwing myself into the mobile and endless labyrinths of everyday life. But in light of everyday lives’ ever-moving character, how to convey a sense of the way it links back into the smooth sense of wholeness that also constitutes places?

It was in phenomenology that I found the epistemological and methodological grounding for my research and a way of addressing the complex interplay between wholes and parts in anthropological methodology and writing. For it is between the
Icarus-view of the whole and the nervousness and rapid interchangeability of its parts that my position as an anthropologist keeps moving back and forth. And it is from the need to create a balance between parts and whole that my move towards phenomenology evolved.

**Between Wholes and Parts**

Reflecting upon the core problems of voice and reflexivity, power dynamics and interpretation, that have preoccupied anthropologists for the last three decades, I am often struck by the sense that we are so desperately looking for our subject matter behind, beyond, underneath and across, that we forget to look at what’s right in front of our eyes. It is as if the world is moving at such an incredibly fast pace, that it becomes harder and harder to get a hold of anything. This sense of fluidity and flimsiness that marks many contemporary anthropological texts is, I suggest, not an effect of the human world turning faster or of social realities becoming ungraspable. Rather, it can be related to the postmodernist ideas that came to influence anthropology in the 1970s and 1980s and peaked with the reflexive turn. As a result, anthropologists pushed their own positionality into the spotlight and came to focus on the constructed, fluid and unstable character of the world. In the course of the *Writing Culture* debate (Clifford & Marcus 1986; Behar & Gordon 1995), objectivity came to be seen as an illusion and any claim of assured knowledge as naïve or politically self-serving (Davies 2010: 2). Rather than describing otherness, it was suggested, anthropology needed to reframe its focus and move towards a cultural critique (Fisher & Marcus 1986).

Undoubtedly, these developments have been of immense importance to the renewal of the anthropological discipline, and they have shaped much of my own upbringing as an anthropologist. It seems, however, that this shift towards reflexivity and cacophony has created an entirely new set of problems: With so many different voices, positions and possibilities to be represented at the same time, anthropology’s subject matter seems to have disappeared. If we include every point of view so as not to essentialise or discriminate against any one position, there is a danger of ending up in a radical form of subjectivity, a subjectivity that transforms every effort to take a position into neutrality. In doing so, however, the subject is not just negated, but could get entirely lost.
Unni Wikan (1991: 292) puts it: “There is a proverb that says: ‘If the tool you have is a hammer, it’s tempting to treat everything as if it were a nail.’ From my vantage point it seems as if there is an awful lot of hammering going on with texts being constructed and deconstructed, again and again, and much of anthropology’s subject matter lost in the process.”

It almost appears as if anthropology’s main concern, a concern Ghassan Hage (2009: 61-62) so poignantly described as the capacity to “know otherness seriously”, has been buried under all the dramatic hammering and tinkering with texts, voices, and positions. Returning to De Certeau’s links between wholes and their parts, it is as if the radical zooming in to individual parts has thrown the possibility of wholeness and with it the unity of the discipline out of balance. What we are left with, then, are parts, so stripped back and isolated, that they don’t seem to link into a smooth and yet complex wholeness like the one Michel De Certeau observed from the 110th floor of the World Trade Center. It was within this vein, that some time ago, Henrietta Moore suggested that anthropology has ceased to exist altogether: what is left, is not a homogenous discipline, but a multiplicity of practices (Moore 1996). If the only things we are left with in anthropology are positions, an endless chorus of unconnected voices and a sense of the fragile and short-lived flimsiness of it all, the question arises: what is that anthropologists are actually looking for? For parts of parts, perhaps? Or for parts of parts of parts …?

In her assessment of the main theoretical turns and developments in anthropology, Kirsten Hastrup highlights the importance of the interplay between wholes and parts that has constituted anthropology from its very beginning as a discipline. Pointing out the division between European social anthropology, which developed in a Durkheimian tradition and Boasian American cultural anthropology, Hastrup stresses that Durkheim’s legacy mainly rests in an understanding of humans as social to the core. This has led to a “wholeness of vision”, to a comprehensive analysis of social forms, individual actions, collective beliefs, material restraints and creative expressions (Hastrup 2005: 133). Hastrup (2005: 138) highlights that while the modernist paradigm gave priority to the system (or the whole) over individuals, postmodernism did the opposite and gave primacy to the individual act. She concludes that both positions now seem unsatisfactory “because they reproduce an untenable opposition between the whole and
the part” and that it is therefore within the realms of present anthropology to move beyond the implicit determinism of both the modernist and postmodernist epoch. “Because fieldwork is no longer seen as a matter of social systems and clarifying their nature but rather as a matter of engaging and radically interpreting lived social worlds, anthropologists are bound to address mutuality of the whole and the part, however these terms are defined”, she writes (Hastrup 2005: 138-139).

It is within the Durkheimian tradition of seeing people as linked through their core humanness, of searching for connections rather than disparities, and of trying to understand the wholeness (or Gestalt) of a phenomenon in interrelation to its parts, that I situate my interest within anthropology. It was from this point of view that I began to look for methodological ways to create a balance between the complex interplay of wholes and parts in my own work. I had been preoccupied with the dominance of parts over wholes for a while, but it was through becoming friends with Halima, Omar and Mohamed, that I was clearly faced with the need to address this unevenness. It was by walking and talking our way through Melbourne together, that I became aware of the importance of finding ways of addressing both the Daedalus perspective, in which even the tiniest nuances of places such as the darkness of the sky or birds on the ground have such a force that they come to permeate and shift our lifeworlds, and the means people use to integrate such experiences into an Icarus look onto the world as a whole. It was in a conversation with Omar, however, that I was really struck by the urge to keep myself from looking behind, beyond, underneath and across, and to focus on what there is instead (Natanson 1973: 54).

**What There Is**

From our first encounters Omar told me stories about his life. He spoke about many details of his long journey to Australia at the end of the 1980s. He tried to explain to me what it means to see one’s country crippled by war and famine from afar. He had told me about his struggle to get his mother and siblings out of Somalia when the civil war broke out, and about how he had met his wife, who had just fled to Nairobi, while he was waiting there for his family. During none of our first meetings had it occurred to me that Omar and his family were not refugees. My project was to write about the life stories of Somalis and he had clearly been compelled to leave Somalia, so how could he
not be a refugee? When I mentioned the term, however, Omar sighed, and talked to me about the Somali word, qaxooti:

“Qax means to run away. Qaxooti is the one who is actually doing that. So it’s the one who’s running away from something. But it never meant before to move from one country to another. Maybe it used to be from one place to another place in the same area. And that word was used when there was a fire and the people were evacuated, or there was a flooding and they ran away to a higher place for safety. It has never been to run from your own country to another country.”

When I asked Omar what he thinks when people call him a refugee, he said: “Qaxooti has got one meaning: If you call me qaxooti, than I’m qaxooti – qaxooti means running away from something. Am I running away from something now? After twenty-three years in Australia? No.”

“So you would say that this word only applies to someone who is in the immediate action of running?” I asked Omar.

“Yes,” he answered. “And afterwards – unless you still believe that I am running away from something.” Thinking about the absurdity of this idea we both began to laugh.

“Am I running away from something after twenty-three years?”

That afternoon, we spent a long time talking about the power of words. Omar struggled to find a suitable alternative to the term qaxooti/refugee that was open enough to capture the complexity of his experience. The verb Somalis use for travelling, he said, the Arabic safar, didn’t fit. Safar, Omar explained, is an adventure people choose, “a kind of drifting”, as he put it, out of the pure joy of movement. His journey away from Somalia was partially driven by a curiosity to see other places, but it was also prompted by the instability in his own country. To describe his movement to Australia as safar would therefore not capture the complexity of his lived experience. Omar also rejected the label migrant, or soogalooti. He explained that in the Somali context, the noun soogalooti is used to describe “someone who has come from a different culture or a different environment, or someone who is new to a particular place”. Like ‘refugee’, he said, it had the potential to mark him as an outsider, as someone who didn’t belong to Australian society. Being a migrant, he said, had to have a limit. “Because if you call me ‘migrant’ then what will come into my mind is: ‘I’m not like anyone else, I’m not Australian, I’m not Aussie’.” He concluded that he didn’t like to be put into a box at all.
Instead, he preferred to be accepted as a member of Australian society, regardless of what had brought him here in the first place. “What I want to feel and what I want my children to feel is that we are Australian,” he said. “Full stop. Nothing more, nothing less.”

As I cycled home that day, it struck me that none of the people who were telling me their life stories, neither Halima, nor Mohamed, nor Omar, and none of the members of their families, had ever referred to being a refugee. For me, I realised, the word had become a metaphor that embodied urgent questions of our time, such as the intertwined forces of inclusion and exclusion that mark the nation-state, as well as the movement and the general sense of homelessness that seems to characterise our world. To uncritically assume that my Somali friends would think likewise would mean beginning with an intellectual structure and ignoring phenomena as they are actually felt, lived and experienced by the people who are labelled as such. When confronted with the absence of refugeeness in the lives of the Somalis I worked with, I was radically reminded that as an anthropologist I cannot set myself above (or behind, or beyond, or underneath, or across) of what matters to the people I’m working with. Like Hannah Arendt (1998: 5), who approaches philosophy as “thinking what we are doing”, I believe that what we do as anthropologists shouldn’t be so far removed from the world of the everyday life, that all meaning or worldliness of the problems get lost.

Attempting to find a way of thinking what we are doing, I began to understand my role as an anthropologist in new terms. Becoming closely involved in Halima’s, Omar’s and Mohamed’s lives, I moved away from the idea that lives are ready to be read and deciphered by a somewhat lonely and removed anthropologist. Walking the everyday together, telling stories to each other, and moving through and within places together, I began to see my role as an anthropologist in terms of its connectedness to others. It was in phenomenology, that I found an epistemological framework of addressing my role as an anthropologist in terms of the intersubjectiveness of walking and talking the everyday. And it was through phenomenology that I found a means to work towards a methodological approach where wholes and parts balance each other in a ceaseless back and forth.
The German philosopher Edmund Husserl, a founding father of phenomenology, showed that consciousness is never something that is closed up in itself but always a consciousness of something (Husserl 1970a). Post-structuralist philosopher Jean-François Lyotard, who became most famous for his formulation of postmodernism, but whose early writings were strongly influenced by phenomenological ideas, grappled with the meaning of phenomena. In his first book, an introduction and examination of phenomenology, Lyotard characterises phenomenology as studying "the given" or that which appears to our consciousness. Phenomenology is an attempt to “explore this given – ‘the thing itself’ which one perceives, of which one thinks and speaks without constructing hypotheses concerning either the relationship which binds this phenomena to the being of which it is phenomena, or the relationship which unites it with the I for which it is phenomena” (Lyotard 1991: 32-33). In contrast to postmodern understandings of appearance, classical phenomenology stresses that parts are only understood against the background of appropriate wholes. Absences in itself therefore make no sense except as played off against the presences that can be achieved through them (Sokolowski 2000: 4).

While there are different schools of thought in phenomenology, the core doctrine is the focus on intentionality. Husserl characterises intentionality as “being conscious of something” (Husserl 1998: 75; emphasis added). The doctrine of intentionality stresses that every act of consciousness is directed towards an object. The turn phenomenology initiated was towards the taken-for-granted and away from the seemingly objective, fixed and intellectually ordered ‘truth’ of positivist thinking. Husserl spoke of the taken-for-granted world we all live in as the Lebenswelt (lifeworld) (Husserl 1970b). This condition, he suggests, this way life is always naively and straightforwardly directed at a world that is already present, is the natürliche Einstellung (natural attitude) (Husserl 1970b: 281). Maurice Natanson, who, along with his teacher Alfred Schutz, elaborated Husserl’s ideas for social research, described it as the perception of what there is (Natanson 1973: 54, emphasis added).

Phenomenologists see subjectivity as reaching beyond the self. Martin Heidegger, Husserl’s student, delivered crucial insights into the ways human existence is always interrelated to others. Heidegger departed from his former teacher’s focus on the transcendental and directed his interest towards the study of being. The shift he initiated
was one towards the interpretation and description of the grounds and conditions of human’s being-in-the-world. Our being-in-the-world, Heidegger stresses, is marked by the continuous attempt to strike a balance between *Mitsein* (being-with-others) and *Selbstsein* (being-one’s-self) (Heidegger 1963: 149-168). It is only by reaching out into the wider world, by encountering others, that we can grasp the notion of our own self (Weiner 2001: 6). In phenomenological understanding, a person becomes a subject for herself by first becoming an object for others (Jackson 1996: 26). Or, as Maurice Merleau-Ponty puts it, “it is false to place ourselves in society as an object amongst other objects as it is to place society within ourselves as an object of thought, and in both cases the mistake lies by treating the social as an object”. Instead, he stresses that thinkers need to attend to the social as something they are already in contact with by the mere fact of existing, by being-in-the-world with others. The social, he notes, “is already there when we come to know or judge it” (Merleau-Ponty 2003: 421).

I situate my work within a phenomenological framework because I am convinced that it opens up the possibility of understanding what being-in-the-world, interrelated to others, means. Instead of focusing on the many differences that seem to divide humans, I believe that anthropologists have to find ways to reveal the shared possibilities and constrains of being. Anthropologists are not only researching other people’s experiences. As researchers, we are part of the same world, a world in which meanings shift and new borders are constantly set up and crossed. Or, as Natanson (1973: 54) put it, there is one world – and there are different ways of attending to it. “To participate in the lives of others, in another society, is to discover the crossing-points where one’s own experience connects with theirs – the points at which sameness subsumes difference”, Michael Jackson (2007: 168) writes. Exactly these crossing-points, the points at which differences fade, perceptions of the self are destabilised and lifeworlds begin to overlap, form my interest in a phenomenologically oriented anthropology.

**The Plurality of Phenomenological Anthropology**

For anthropologists to work with phenomenological methods entails a shift in focus from theoretical abstraction to the ordinariness of everyday life. Knowledge is no longer seen as something that belongs to the intellectual domain, for its very existence can only
grow out of what has been there (in the lifeworld) in the first place. “To shift our focus from the privileged world of detached intellectual activity to the often underprivileged domains of the lifeworld is to reconstitute our notion of knowledge as something urgently of and for the world rather than something about the world”, Michael Jackson (1996: 37) writes. For anthropologists to embed their work in phenomenology means a move towards the way meanings are lived, described and understood in the everyday lives of the people they are studying.

With its closeness to people’s everyday lives and experiences of the world, anthropology has much to contribute to phenomenology. Yet, it is difficult to delineate the boundaries of the field of phenomenological anthropology. Phenomenological anthropologist Thomas Csordas and sociologist Jack Katz stress that the position of phenomenology within the anthropological discipline (and specifically in US anthropology) has been so marginal that it was hardly ever considered as a methodological stance worthy of being opposed (Katz & Csordas 2003: 277). Robert Desjarlais and Jason Throop come to a different conclusion: they stress that over the past twenty-five years, phenomenological approaches have become increasingly important (Desjarlais & Throop 2011). These difficulties to map out a field of phenomenological anthropology could have much to do with the fact that there are many phenomenologies to start with. Because phenomenological anthropology covers different schools of thought, thematic focal points and methodological approaches, outlining its contours is difficult. The field is remarkably diverse, making it hard to bring together the different perspectives into a coherent approach that could be labelled ‘phenomenological anthropology’. If we do not only include the fairly small group of writers who clearly position themselves within a phenomenological school of thought, but also those who have borrowed some of its major ideas and concepts without identifying with a phenomenological project, then phenomenology can be seen as an important force in anthropology. If we broaden the focus even further and look at the influence of phenomenological concepts on thinkers such as Michel Foucault or Pierre Bourdieu, whose works have shaped anthropological discourses over the last decades, the spectrum of phenomenological ideas in anthropology becomes even wider.

In the midst of the crisis of ethnography in the 1980s and 1990s some anthropologists began to look critically at the discipline’s neglect of people’s everyday experiences and
to explicitly ground their work within a phenomenologically oriented anthropology. Instead of putting the focus entirely on the contextual production of ethnography as a text, they emphasised the intersubjectivity of the fieldwork experience. From this common interest in lived experience, however, the approaches branched out into different directions, each of them influenced by different phenomenological schools (Desjarlais & Throop 2011: 88), which can be traced back to American pragmatism, specifically to the writings of William James and John Dewey; to the classical phenomenological and existentialist works of Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Hannah Arendt, Edith Stein and Emanuel Levinas; to the hermeneutic phenomenology of Wilhelm Dilthey, Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur; and to the deconstructivist phenomenology of Jacques Derrida. Inspired by these schools of thought, phenomenological anthropologists work under different labels, such as ‘cultural phenomenology’, ‘hermeneutic anthropology’, ‘radical empiricism’, ‘critical phenomenology’, or ‘existential anthropology’ (Knibbe & Versteeg 2008: 48).

Just as difficult as pinning down the different approaches to a phenomenological anthropology, is the question of how phenomenological ideas came to enter the discipline and how these complex philosophical concepts were elaborated and made fit for social realities – but also where to place my own thinking within this plurality of approaches. However divergent the approaches and the geographical and thematic focal points of phenomenologically oriented anthropologists are, they all share an interest in people's everyday experience of the world. While anthropologists choose diverging ways of embarking on a phenomenologically oriented anthropology, the idea of experience forms a crossroads, a point from where they all start and to which they all return. Because the idea of experience also formed a crossroads for my own focus and because it strongly determined my methodological approach, I follow my attempt of outlining the field of phenomenological anthropology (and my own position within it)
by giving an idea of the way this concept came to enter and eventually form a phenomenologically oriented anthropology. This is not to suggest that the concept of experience alone constitutes a phenomenological anthropology. Precisely because of the diversity of approaches there are many other ways of framing the field. I could have chosen to focus on other crucial phenomenological concepts, such as the lifeworld, embodiment, intersubjectivity, or the epoch and the ways they have been formed and transformed in the anthropological context, but whatever angles I took, they all lead back to the overarching question how humans experience the world they are living in.

**Toward an Experience-Near Anthropology**

The work of Alfred Schutz and his attempt to bring phenomenology into the social sciences laid the foundation for what Unni Wikan (1991) labelled an “experience-near” anthropology. In *The Phenomenology of the Social World*, Schutz applies Husserl’s work to “analyse the phenomenon of meaning” in ordinary social life (Schutz 1972: 44). Schutz disagreed with sociological theories that approach life from a seemingly objective, scientific point of view. Instead, he turned towards the lifeworld and focused on the ways people make sense of their social worlds. While he was strongly influenced by Husserl’s classical phenomenology, Schutz found that some of Husserl’s propositions didn’t work when transferred to the social sciences. Over the course of his life, Schutz became more and more convinced of the necessity to move beyond Husserl’s phenomenology to enable the development of a stronger anthropology (and ontology) of the lifeworld (Wagner 1983: 245).

One of the first anthropologists to adopt a phenomenological approach was Irving Hallowell, who in the 1950s stressed that anthropology needed to find ways to better understand people’s everyday experience of the world and their culture. In *Culture and Experience* he proposed that “it should be possible to formulate more explicitly the necessary and sufficient conditions that make a human existence possible and which account for the distinctive quality of human experience” (Hallowell 1955: vii-viii). In his attempt to come to a better understanding of human experience and the human condition in general, Hallowell explored phenomenological ideas. While Hallowell and other early pioneers made significant first moves toward the constitution of a
phenomenological anthropology (see Watson 1970; Bidney 1973), it was the work of Victor Turner and Clifford Geertz and their focus on experience that first introduced a larger audience to phenomenological ideas.

In his groundbreaking book *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Clifford Geertz applied aspects of Alfred Schutz’ social phenomenology and looked for means to attend to experience. “What we want and do not yet have is a developed method of describing and analyzing the meaningful structure of experience (here, the experience of persons) as it is apprehended by representative members of a particular society at a particular point in time – in a word, a scientific phenomenology of culture”, he writes (Geertz 1973: 364). Geertz (1973: 5) stresses that it is through interpretation that anthropologists can explore the webs of significance that constitute culture. He defines culture as “the fabric of meaning in terms of which human beings interpret their experiences and guide their action” (Geertz 1973: 145).

While Geertz elaborated his experiential approach by deploying some of Husserl’s and Schutz’s concepts, he only toyed with phenomenological ideas. He was ambivalent about the usefulness of phenomenology for ethnographic concerns, and distanced himself from Husserl’s concept of the natural attitude (Geertz 1973: 110), because it put too much emphasis on subjective experiences. The term “scientific phenomenology” itself already hints at his conflicting relationship with phenomenology: While he was interested in Schutz’s and Husserl’s focus on lived experience, he believed that a purely phenomenological approach would run the risk of getting stuck in subjective introspection (Geertz 1973: 12-13). These ambivalences notwithstanding, Geertz’s explicit focus on experience can be seen as one of the first significant contributions to the theorisation of experience. It also acquainted a new generation of anthropologists with phenomenological ideas and debates. Several anthropologists – for example, Vincent Crapanzano (1990; 1992), Byron Good (1994), Cheryl Mattingly (1998, 2010), and Robert Desjarlais (2003) – have extended Geertz’s work to develop hermeneutic phenomenological approaches. Their aim is to tackle the complexity of the interpretive process that accompanies ethnographic work and to highlight the intersubjective encounters between anthropologists and their informants as crucial moments of meaning making.
Besides Clifford Geertz’s somewhat ambivalent ventures into phenomenological questions, it was the work of Victor Turner that paved the way for a more critical understanding of experience. Towards the end of his career he turned away from a structural-functionalist focus on ritual performance and outlined a concept of experience (see Turner 1982; 1985). While in his earlier work he had mainly been interested in the bodily and sensory dimensions of experience in ritual activity, the explicit focus on the concept of experience transformed this physiological understanding of experience into what Jason Throop (2003: 222) labels a “trichotomy” of cognitive, affective and volitional dimensions.

Turner’s ideas were influenced by the concept of *Erlebnis* (what has been lived through), which had been developed by Wilhelm Dilthey. Experience, in Turner’s work, is highlighted in terms of its multilayered structuring and in terms of its dialectical relationship with its expressions. In the 1980s Victor Turner and Edward Bruner formulated what they called an “anthropology of experience” (Turner & Bruner 1986). In developing such an experiential approach, Turner expressed his lifelong discontent with anthropology’s strong focus on social models and its neglect of people’s everyday experiences and struggles (Bruner 1986: 3). “The anthropology of experience deals with how individuals actually experience their culture”, Bruner (1986: 4) explains, “that is, how events are received by consciousness.”

Turner and Geertz made the concept of lived experience – and with it some of phenomenology’s core ideas – accessible to a wider range of anthropologists. At the same time, however, they left many questions regarding that concept unanswered. While since the 1990s, lived experience has become increasingly important to anthropologists, and many rely on it for describing the realities of human existence, the roots and complexity of the concept itself often remain unscrutinised. According to Desjarlais and Throop (2011: 93), when used in an unreflective way, “the category itself at times presumes and promotes unexamined cultural assumptions concerning articulations of self, subjectivity, and social action that may blind us to other possible forms of life and ways of being”. As a result, anthropologists who more explicitly situate themselves within a phenomenological anthropology have begun to critically examine the concept of experience (see: Desjarlais 1997; Mattingly 1998; Throop 2003, 2009b, 2010). A growing number of phenomenological anthropologists have also begun
to explore in more detail how embodied experience and cultural meanings overlap (for example: Kleinman 1980; Stoller 1989, 1997a/b; Csordas 1990; 1994 a, 1994b; Geurts 2003; Throop 2009a).

My own point of departure has been the insight that it is crucial to focus on things as they are experienced. My initial idea of experience was connected to Turner’s reading of Dilthey’s concept of Erlebnis. Over the course of my research, however, I developed a stronger emphasis on the existential dynamics of experience because the dynamics of storytelling and of walking and talking the everyday with my Somali friends confronted me with practical dilemmas of the concept of experience. I suggest that Dilthey’s concept of Erlebnis, and with it the way experience has been shaped in anthropology, needs to be looked at in terms of its connection to the concept of Erfahrung. Both, Erlebnis and Erfahrung, are translated as ‘experience’. But while Erlebnis is immediate, unreflected experience, Erfahrung is the point at which experience is examined and articulated. This distinction, pivotal to understanding Dilthey’s concept of Erlebnis, is not one between the internal and the external, but between the pre-reflective and the reflective (Throop 2002: 6). Michael Jackson (1996: 42) stresses that Husserl’s writings also include the crucial insight that there are “significant differences between the way the world appears to our consciousness when we are fully engaged in activity and the way it appears to us when we subject it to reflection and retrospective analysis”. This distinction also became essential for my own work, because it helped me understand some of the dynamics and restraints I faced.

While I began my project with an interest in Erlebnis (lived experience), for two reasons the focus gradually shifted towards experience in terms of reflected Erfahrung: first, because the act of telling a life story is always reflected, performed and articulated experience; and second, because the individuality of the life story setting made it difficult to come to an understanding of the more embodied, lived and sensed layers of experience. While becoming closely involved in Halima’s family and developing friendships with both Mohamed and Omar gave me glimpses into the immediate and pre-reflective dimension of experience, these moments often revealed more about myself and my own experiences of them. As a result, the stories of Halima and Omar that made their way into the thesis tell more about experience in terms of Erfahrung, while it is through my own stories that experience as Erlebnis becomes visible.
This is not to suggest that there is an unbridgeable gap between researchers and the people they study, or that it is impossible to understand the way other people experience the world. It is also not to deny that these two modes of experience overlap. As I point out in the next section, the act of storytelling itself can be viewed as a way of actively living through experiences, turning reflected experience into a form of lived experience. While I found it easier to relate to my own immediate and bodily experiences, these experiences didn’t grow in isolation from the people who lived through those moments with me. On the other hand, thinking of lived experience solely as immediate, bodily and non-reflective and as entirely disconnected from reflected and narrated experiences, oversimplifies the complex interplay between Erlebnis and Erfahrung. Here I agree with Cheryl Mattingly, who has challenged the dichotomy between experience as narrated and experience as lived. She criticizes the notion that lived experience is a non-narrated “prelinguistic bombardment of the senses” and stresses that “narrative imitates experience because experience already has in it the seeds of narrative” (Mattingly 1998: 45). I also agree with Jason Throop, who notes (2003: 227) that the contradictory ways experience has been theorised in anthropology may point to something fundamental about the multi-layered structure of experience itself. The stories Halima, Omar and Mohamed told me, and the overlapping of lived and reflected experience hinted at experience’s many layers. At the same time, however, this diversity in how people engage with the world also illustrated something about what it means to be human.

This interest in the conditions of being came to guide and form my research and my phenomenological orientation. This orientation is strongly linked to the tradition of existential phenomenology, specifically to the work of Martin Heidegger. He wrote about the existential dynamics of our Dasein as a Geworfenheit (thrownness) into the world (Heidegger 1962: 219-224). He stresses that humans find themselves thrown into a situation that is not of their making. This doesn’t mean that they do not have the means to leap into action or obtain changes, but rather that human life is never undetermined or neutral, that we are always already situated in something. This being in constitutes the setting and limits for our meaning-making (Withy 2011: 2). Applied to the anthropological setting, thrownness becomes a way of approaching the means and strategies people deploy for dealing with the situations they find themselves in. Rather
than studying culture, the focus shifts toward the grounds and possibilities for human existence.

This orientation is in the tradition of what Michael Jackson mapped out as an existential anthropology (for example: Jackson 1995; 2005a; 2009; 2012). Jackson’s anthropological work is guided by the single existential question of how people transform givenness into choice, “so that the world into which they are thrown becomes a world that they can call their own” (Jackson 1995: 123). In applying phenomenological methods, existential anthropologists attempt to theorise the question of social being. In his work, Jackson focuses on “critical events” to highlight the question of being as a dynamic relationship “between the forces that act upon us and our capacity for bringing the new into being” (Jackson 2005a: xi). In my research, I focused on stories rather than events. These stories, as well as the act of storytelling itself, illuminate the existential dynamics Jackson points out. The stories Halima and Omar told me and Mohamed’s photos speak of a constant back and forth between human’s thrownness into the world and their strengths and capacities to move within and beyond these restraints. It is exactly within these dynamics between thrownness and picking oneself up, that the continuous back and forth movements between experience as Erlebnis and experience as Erfahrung need to be understood. My focus can thus be read within the lines of the work of Michael Jackson and of anthropologists such as James Weiner (1991, 2001), Anne Dalsgaard (2004), Arthur Kleinman (2006), Hans Lucht (2011) and Robert Desjarlais (2011), who put the question of being into the centre of their anthropological encounters.

Having given an outline of the epistemological framework against which my thesis can be read, in the second part of this chapter I focus more closely on the two methods I worked with.
2.

STORIED LIVES

The Storytelling Animal

Some of my earliest childhood memories are formed around stories my father told us children. These memories take me back to the blue-painted house in Heerkensveld 10 in the Dutch city of Eindhoven, where I lived until I was eight years old and we moved to Austria. I clearly remember the evening ritual my father performed for my sister Lisa and me every night before bedtime. After showering and brushing our teeth, all three of us would lie down in Lisa’s bed and then my father would read us a story. I remember everything with breath-taking clarity – the smell of the attic, where all five of us kids had our rooms, the pounding of the rain on the angular roof on rainy nights, the closeness of three people cramped into a children’s bed and my sister’s giggles when my father had fallen asleep again and his snores were becoming loud. “Stop laughing!” I would scold her, “If you aren’t quiet he’s going to wake up and then he will turn off the lights.” We thought that as long as my father didn’t tell us to turn off the lights and go to sleep, we could practically stay awake forever. Squished into the small bed, we would quietly tell each other stories or, sometimes, just wait. Our goal was to keep him asleep until midnight for once so that we could stay up until that magical hour.

My father turned the most boring and moralistic children’s books into adventurous and fantastic tales. He had the habit of beginning by reading from a book but then invent his own ending. As we listened to the same stories again and again, Lisa and I grew to know them by heart. We longed for the moment when he would begin to give an entirely new twist to a plot, changing all the characters around. But the stories we loved most were the ones my father told us about his own childhood. Born just after the Second World War as the youngest of three boys in Millstatt, a village in Austria, he was a rebellious and cheeky child, a Lausbua as my grandmother Oma Pepi called him in the local dialect. The Lems family occupied an outsider’s position in Millstatt. Not only was my grandmother married to a Dutchman who had been taken to Austria by the Nazis as a forced labourer, her father had also been active in the conservative resistance against the Nazis and was installed by the British as mayor after the end of the war.
“My grandfather’s conservatism in this case actually helped him,” my father used to joke. “He was so much against any kind of change that he couldn’t even deal with the modern ideas the Nazis embodied for him.”

My father felt an urge to revolt against the strict Catholic conservatism and the hidden fascist remnants in the village. The stories he told us evolved around his little, cheeky victories. There were stories about how he spent half of his primary school years kneeling in the corner of the classroom, where the teacher had sent him, and how he imitated the teacher from there, making the whole class laugh. There was the village priest, whose hat he managed to knock off his head from a hiding place with just one well-aimed kick of a snowball, leaving the old man puzzled and swearing for the evildoer to come out of his hiding. There were many stories of his year in the military, where he pretended to be so incredibly silly that the superiors decided not to entrust him with any job that entailed more responsibility than keeping the stoves in the rooms heated. But our favourite story was of my father jumping from the balcony on the second floor with an umbrella in an attempt to imitate parachutists he had seen a few weeks earlier.

Through my father’s stories his childhood and the village’s social ecology came alive. We got a feeling for the traces the war had left behind and for the complexity of our family’s present position within these settings. Through his stories we were able to walk with him through parts of his life that had had the potential to leave him disempowered and weakened but which, in the manner of the great old tales, always found a resolution, a moment of relief and victory. Whether things had exactly happened the way my father told them didn’t matter, for, as Vincent Crapanzano (1980: 9) points out, autobiography is essentially a process of self-creation. It gives an order to past events and tries to establish a link between what the narrator was then and what he is today (Corradi 1991: 107). My father’s stories were of such power that they have woven themselves into the patterns of my innermost landscapes. In conveying a sense of the moods, troubles and victories of being-in-the-world, they have become an intricate part of my seeing the world.

While we create, form and transform stories, stories also have the power to create, form and transform us. It is through telling stories that we create meaning of our experiences
of the world, and it is through hearing stories that we gain a sense of what it means to be in the world in relation to others. Humans are, philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre suggests (2002: 216), essentially “story-telling animals”. Through stories we explain the world and reach out to it, and through stories our lives move beyond the self and become storied lives (Rosenwald & Ochberg 1992).

As Hannah Arendt (1998: 50) points out in The Human Condition, storytelling is located at the intersection between private and public interests. When compared to the reality which comes from being seen and heard, “even the greatest forces of intimate life […] lead an uncertain, shadowy kind of existence unless and until they are transformed, deprivatized and deindividualized, as it were, into a shape to fit them for public appearance”. As Arendt notes, storytelling transforms our inner experiences and by bringing them in relation to a wider world bestows them with meaning: “The presence of others who see what we see and hear what we hear assures us of the reality of the world and ourselves.” (Arendt 1998: 50) By transforming stories and extending them beyond the boundaries of our private worlds, by being seen and heard, humans reach out to the world and transform being into something essentially linked to others.

Stories are created intersubjectively and gain their strength from being shared with and heard by others. At the same time, just like the twists my father gave to the stories he told us, they also derive their strength from the continuous process of modelling and remodelling. In The Storyteller, Walter Benjamin (2007: 91-92) suggests that storytelling “sinks the thing into the life of the storyteller, in order to bring it out of him again”. It is this dynamic interplay between sinking in and bringing out that makes life storytelling such a fruitful method of understanding emplacement and displacement. The creative possibility of the story to remodel and retell, to meet and overcome obstacles, to point at or transform conflict, makes it a valuable tool in the work with people who have experienced violent disruptions in their lives.

This isn’t to suggest that the act of telling stories effects a psychological resolution of deep-rooted problems or traumata. Rather, life stories allow us to shed light both on the teller’s hopes, imaginations and ambitions, and on the reality of being part of a wider world that often contradicts and shatters these hopes. In the Phenomenology of Perception, Merleau-Ponty describes these dynamics. He observes that while every
individual is acted upon, she or he is also open to possibilities. These situations define our choices: “To be born is both to be born of the world and to be born into the world”, he writes. While the world is already constituted, it is never complete. “In the first place we are acted upon, in the second we are open to an infinite number of possibilities”, he writes. Because humans always exist in both ways and at once, there is no such thing as absolute determinism or absolute choice (Merleau-Ponty 2003: 527). It is exactly these dynamics of being born of and into the world that existential anthropology aims to capture, and that Michael Jackson (2002), in *The Politics of Storytelling*, has elaborated for the domain of storytelling. Focusing on stories from people in different parts of the world who have experienced violence and suffering, Jackson shows that storytelling is a crucial human strategy for sustaining a sense of agency in the context of disempowering circumstances. He stresses that the narrative reworking of reality through storytelling can be a means to symbolically alter the balance between actor and acted upon, allowing us to regain control over events that make us feel helpless or lost (Jackson 2002: 16-17). Storytelling as an anthropological method, then, has more to reveal than one individual’s life. It also is a crucial means for understanding the ways humans alter and actively make sense of their thrownness into the world.

I see the strength and value of the life story as a method in its ability to create an understanding of humans as being born of and into the world, as actors and acted upon. In the context of forced migration, it enables a movement away from ‘refugee stories’ as manifestations of trauma, instability and victimhood towards a more complex understanding of displacement. Halima’s, Mohamed’s and Omar’s stories give an insight into both the struggles and violent forces that crossed their plans and hopes, and their innermost strengths and capabilities that allowed them to regain a sense of balance – at times even under the most destabilising circumstances.

Working with life stories as a method opened up two core questions. The first centres on the issue of how to understand life stories and the complex interplay between lives as storied and lives as lived. It requires that I briefly retrace my steps and return to some of the epistemological questions I touched upon in the first part of this chapter. This detour allows for a better understanding of the ways storytelling and experience intersect. The second problem touches upon questions of genre, interpretation and writing that arise from the act of telling and re-telling life stories.
Sometimes, when Halima or Omar shared their stories with me, I didn’t feel that I was listening to individuals making sense of experiences from a past long gone. It felt as if those experiences were so present, so here and within the moment of the telling, that the boundaries between story and person vanished.

In his essay on storytelling, Walter Benjamin suggests that the movement between *sinking in* and *bringing out* constitutes the storytelling process. He also stresses that the storyteller leaves an imprint of herself on the story: “Thus traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel”. (Benjamin 2007: 91-92.) It is because stories essentially draw from *experience* that imprints of the teller’s life stick to the story, to the extent that they mould and form it into a shape ready for exchange with others. If traces of the storyteller cling to the story, the question arises whether traces of the story also cling to the storyteller, work inside her and shape her. Are we storied selves in the sense that we *live* the stories we tell?

In *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre (2002: 211) describes human actions as enacted narratives. He notes that humans live out narratives in their lives, and at the same time understand their lives in terms of the narratives they live out. Through narratives, people come to understand the actions of others. In MacIntyre’s understanding, an agent is not only an actor, but also an author, or, as he specifies, a co-author of his own story. That we are merely the co-authors of our narratives derives from the fact that it is only in fantasy that we can live the story as we please. In daily life people are always under certain constraints: “We enter upon a stage which we did not design and we find ourselves part of an action that was not of our making. Each of us being a main character in his own drama plays subordinate parts in the dramas of others, and each drama constrains the others.” (MacIntyre 2002: 213) According to MacIntyre, humans, in their interactions, follow a narrative script, a larger plot that links our narratives to those of others and determines us to act within such a story following certain characters and their actions. In MacIntyre’s view, humans are storytelling animals to the core; they do not just live by the stories they tell, they essentially *are* the stories they tell.
In a talk British philosopher Bernard Williams gave in the late 1980s in Berkeley and that was published posthumously, he opposed MacIntyre’s view that stories can be used to understand human lives (Williams 2009). While Williams agrees that narratives provide powerful means of understanding the world, he notes that we can only identify with them if we already have a conception of a person’s life. It is only from such a conception that people can recognize what the story of such a thing might be like. Therefore, Williams (2009: 306-307) stresses, our conception of a person’s life cannot be derived from narratives. “We have a much greater interest, as it seems to me, in living a life that is our own and in having an adequate grasp, at the time, of the considerations that at various stages direct it, than we do in the ambition that it should genuinely present a well shaped tale to potential narrators of it.” (Williams 2009: 313)

Anthropologists have long grappled with the question of how to understand or approach life stories. Many of the troubles they encountered arise exactly from the questions MacIntyre and Williams argued over: Do stories have the ability to represent lives? Or are they mere fiction? Sarah Lamb (2001: 16) locates the core problem in the difficulty for anthropologists to decide whether life stories speak of life as actually lived, or of life as constructed in narration. She describes these dynamics as the interplay between lives and words. Lamb points out that part of this problem arises from the fact that the life story cannot be taken as a direct, objective account of actual events that happened in an external and transparent past. Therefore, scholars like Vincent Crapanzano (1984), Edward Bruner (1988), Ruth Behar (1990) and Unni Wikan (1995, 1996) have suggested that when working with life stories, researchers need to be aware of the distinction between life as represented through the story and life as actually lived.

The complex interplay between lives and words marked anthropological attempts to work with life stories from its very beginning. While anthropologists have always collected people’s life stories, the power of words over lives held the upper hand for a long time. Individuals’ stories often found their ways into ethnographies, yet not as stories in their own right. In classical monographs, personal accounts drowned under the weight of larger structural and scientific problems that needed exposure, and references to the persons who told these stories in the first place often got lost. According to Lawrence Watson and Maria-Barbara Watson-Franke (1985: 4) one of the main reasons for anthropologists’ long reluctance to work with life stories lies is that they didn’t
know what to do with them. Because of the problematic relationship of stories of individuals to questions of objectivity and representativeness, anthropologists were unsure about how to approach them. As a result, the first life histories were published with the main purpose of illustrating objective facts about a culture (see: Kroeber 1908).

With the publication of the landmark sociological work *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (Thomas & Znaniecki 1919), the acceptance of using life histories as a means of inquiry grew across all social sciences. Yet, the two authors do not establish a notion of life stories as interesting documents in their own rights, but as representatives for specific groups, problems or ‘cultures’. Paul Radin was the first anthropologist to use life history as a core method for ethnographic understanding. His book *Crashing Thunder*, which was published in 1926, provides a detailed life history of a Winnebago man. Similar to Thomas and Znaniecki’s work, however, Radin’s purpose was not to portray a particular individual but to paint the picture of a “representative, middle-aged individual of moderate ability” (Radin 2002: 207). Radin wanted to understand the social group in relation to which the individual narrated his story, rather than the individual himself. Although a number of interesting anthropological life histories published in the 1960s and 1970s (see for example: Mintz 1960; Lewis 1961; Freeman 1979) raised some important general questions about life histories’ context, representativeness and the role of the researcher, they didn’t make explicit enough the extent of editing and rearranging that went into the production of the written texts (Powles 2004: 3).

In the 1970s and 1980s, anthropologists started to approach people’s stories in new ways. Instead of working with life histories, they now focused on life stories, meaning that the lived experiences of individuals were pushed into the academic spotlight. The desire for a new methodology grew partly out of the reflexive turn mentioned earlier, which sparked a distrust of the representation of peoples, communities and classes as coherent entities (Frank 1995: 145). The change can also be read against the backdrop of the literary and hermeneutic turn, which brought with it a new interest in the narrative construction of reality. While life histories focus on diachronic change within anthropology’s traditional paradigms of naturalism or realism, life stories focus on the cultural scripts and narrative devices that individuals use to make sense of experience (Frank 1995: 145).

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The push for this new methodological approach in anthropology grew out of two different discourses. On the one hand, debates about the position of ethnographers vis-à-vis the people they research made anthropologists call for new, more democratic approaches that at the same time reflected the fact that in many parts of the world people might not think of themselves in terms of discrete, individualistic and linear life histories. On the other hand, this new approach grew out of the hermeneutic phenomenological notion that “meaning is ascribed to phenomena through being experienced and, furthermore, that we can only know something about other people’s experiences from the expressions they give them” (Eastmond 2007: 249). Over the past thirty years, then, there has been a methodological shift from the realist approach of life histories to a focus on experience. In the course of this shift, anthropologists’ interest gradually moved towards what Lila Abu-Lughod (1991) described as an “ethnography of the particular”. This change could be characterised as one from words to lives, from the verifiable recounting of the past to life stories as subjective documents.

Besides a stronger interest in the particularities of individuals’ lives, the shift also propelled anthropologists to experiment with ways of writing life stories (for example: Shostak 1981; Dwyer 1982). With the acceptance that life stories are products of editorial processes, that they are not exact replications of the stories told to the ethnographer, came the call to let these dynamics become part of ethnographic texts. Vincent Crapanzano’s work can be seen as exemplary of this shift. In 1980, he published the life story of Tuhami, a Moroccan tile-maker who believes that he is married to a camel-footed she-demon. Crapanzano gives insight into the man’s complex world of thought, a world that is marked by constant battles between demons and saints who aim to take possession of his life. Rather than taking Tuhami as a representative for his culture, the book focusses on the complex dynamics between the ethnographer and his informant. Crapanzano doesn’t just write about Tuhami but also lets him speak in his own voice. His reading of Tuhami’s life story is troubled by fragments of Tuhami’s (often contradictory) points of view, creating a patchwork of stories, encounters, dreams and interpretations.

The idea of focussing on one individual’s life story grew out of Crapanzano’s concern with “the anthropologist’s impress on the material he collects and his presentation of it”
(Crapanzano 1980: ix). He was critical of the way anthropologists had proclaimed their neutrality and left their own presence out of the life stories they wrote. Crapanzano, an important proponent of a hermeneutic interpretive approach, describes the problematic position of the anthropologist as a “Hermes Dilemma”: Just like the ancient trickster, the anthropologist acts as a messenger between different worlds, and just like any trickster, he gets caught in between the desires and powers of the message givers, the message receivers and his own. Crapanzano (1992: 3-4) stresses that there is therefore a need for the anthropologist to interpret, translate, contextualise and elaborate the message. In order to make the position of the anthropologist as messenger visible, he explored unconventional forms of ethnographic writing. Within this vein, Tuhami is, as he puts it, “an experiment designed to shock the anthropologist and the reader of anthropology” (Crapanzano 1980: xii).

Over the course of the *Writing Culture* debate Tuhami came to be celebrated for its experimental take on an individual’s life story and for its attempt to make the role of the ethnographer visible. Yet more than thirty years after its publication and against the backdrop of other ‘experiments’ with life stories, it could be argued that the book itself gets tangled up in a Hermes Dilemma. Where former anthropologists had tended to erase their presence from the production of people’s life histories, Tuhami did the extreme opposite: While the book dwells on Crapanzano’s fears and desires as an ethnographer, it doesn’t leave much room for Tuhami’s story. Klaus Neumann (1995: 225) points out that *Tuhami* is marked by Crapanzano’s paradoxical move to contain Tuhami’s voice immediately after having set it free. While fragments of Tuhami’s story told in his own voice are interspersed throughout the book, these fragments are immediately followed by the ethnographer’s long-winded and detailed contextualisation. Worried about the level of fiction that finds its way into Tuhami’s life story, Crapanzano feels obliged to continually intervene and correct him. “Crapanzano is interested in Tuhami’s life story”, Neumann (1995: 226) writes. Yet, “Instead of conveying his story, Tuhami tells him stories.” Somewhat perplexed over what to do with the level of fiction that mark these stories, Crapanzano turns Tuhami into a “figure within an imposed allegory that in a very real sense bypasses him”. Tuhami is not what propels Crapanzano’s experiment. Tuhami the storyteller and tile-maker becomes

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8 My translation.
‘Tuhami’ – an allegory that enables the ethnographer to “raise the problematic of the life history and the ethnographic encounter” (Crapanzano 1980: xi). Where life histories written before the reflexive turn frequently essentialised the storytellers as representatives of ‘a’ culture, Crapanzano could be said to use Tuhami’s story only as a vehicle to write about the ethnographic practice. Rather than marking a gradual shift from life histories to life stories, Tuhami represents a complete turnaround, resulting in a different imbalance between lives and words. At the same time, however, the book also marked an important break with former conventions of life story writing.

At about the same time as Crapanzano’s Tuhami project, some other anthropologists began producing ethnographies based on life stories that resulted in a closer balance between lives and words (for example: Rosaldo 1976; Shostak 1981). While anxious not to essentialise or erase the ethnographer’s role in the creation of the life story, their focus was on the people who had shared their stories. In 1983, for example, Michael Young published a compelling ethnography on the Magicians of Manumanua in Melanesian Kalauna society. The book is centred on the stories of lyahalina, one of the village’s ‘Big Men’ as well as on the accounts of two other men, both of whom are struggling to establish the leadership of their clans. In focusing on the particularities of the lives and experiences of Kalauna’s most influential men, Young creates a complex and multi-layered picture of political leadership that moves beyond essentialising portrayals of Melanesian ‘Big Men’. His book also gives important insights into the different forms life stories can take on. When Young first started working with lyahalina, he was surprised by the stories he heard. Like Tuhami, lyahalina didn’t speak about his childhood, marriage or mature achievements, but narrated myths describing his ancestors and their activities. But instead of disregarding these myths for their lack of autobiographical coherence, Young came to appreciate their importance for Kalauna everyday life: “Coming as I did from a civilization that has debased myths by defining them as falsehoods, and professing an academic discipline that tends to leach them of moral and emotional content, it took me some time to respect the solemnity and high seriousness with which Kalauna men regarded their myths” Young (1983: 4) writes. The self-glorifying myths the men told him became crucial to understanding their lived experiences. It was through these stories that they legitimised their roles and personal
identities and attempted to actively enforce a consensus about their qualities and powers (Young 1983: 261).

Where Crapanzano’s concentration on his own story and on the conditions of ethnographic fieldwork had rendered Tuhami’s portrait – and with it his lived experience – out of focus, Young’s core emphasis was on the stories he encountered. In my own approach, I was looking for ways to create a bridge between these two approaches to life stories. While I wanted to keep my focus on the stories Halima and Omar told me, I also began to recognise how these stories intersected with my own lifeworld and hinted at shared experiences that are quintessentially human. At the same time, however, I was eager not to let my own story dominate and thereby silence the particularities and uniqueness of Halima’s and Omar’s experiences. The challenge, then, was to find ways to best attend to the different layers of experience that constitute the storytelling moment – both in the telling and the writing of life stories.

In looking for ways to write and think life stories, I found much inspiration in the work of Ruth Behar, who successfully bridges both approaches. In Translated Woman, Behar focuses on the life story of Esperanza Hernández, an indigenous Mexican street pedlar. Edited into a compelling first-person narrative, Behar unravels Esperanza’s lifeworld by putting emphasis on the storytelling moment. In late-night conversations, Esperanza tells her comadre Behar her life story – a life marked by poverty, hardship and physical abuse from her father and husband. At the same time, her story doesn’t get stuck in a diminishing state of victimhood. Esperanza’s story also tells of her capabilities and strengths in overcoming these obstacles, leaving her husband and establishing a high level of independence. Behar (1993: 273) writes that for Esperanza, the idea of a life story was related to that of a confession, but in ways that didn’t have anything to do with the Western notion of confession as the revelation of dark secrets. Instead, her life story consisted of thickly dialogue stories, and within these stories her own position switched back and forth from victim to heroine.

Translated Woman isn’t just an account of Esperanza’s life. It also is the story of a friendship between two women from very different cultural and socio-economic backgrounds, which makes a fruitful dialogue about experiences of womanhood possible. Translated Woman is also the ethnographer’s story. For Behar it was crucial to
embed her own story in order to shed light on what drove her to spend so much time listening to another person. While Esperanza’s story remains the heart of the book, Behar also interweaves snippets of her own autobiography to create a clearer picture “of this woman who has been hiding behind the story of another woman’s life” (Behar 1993: 336). In this, she follows Gelya Frank’s (1979: 85) call for “shadow biographies” that make the investigator's private thoughts, interview questions, field notes, dreams, and letters home part of anthropological life story writing. Frank and Behar both stress that life stories do not just speak of the teller’s lived experience. The intimacy of the storytelling situation and the layers of editing that form and transform the story into a written text also shed light on the processes that blend the experiences of the researcher with those of the teller. Therefore, as Frank (1979: 85) points out, life stories often also represent a personal portrait of the anthropologist.

This insight directed my attention to the many layers of experience storytelling relates to. Like the hands of the potter on the clay vessel Benjamin describes, the stories Halima and Omar told me left traces in me, which became an intricate part of my own being-here and formed my understanding of emplacement and displacement. Like Behar, I tried to make these dynamics visible and to integrate parts of my own story. At the same time, these very dynamics also pointed at the constant overlapping of experience as reflected (Erfahrung) and experience as lived through (Erlebnis). It made me understand that while the stories Halima and Omar told me were reflections on past experiences, the very act of storying allowed them to actively reshape and re-live some of these experiences. Lived experience thus entailed both: narrated, thought-out Erfahrung and constantly relived and reshaped forms of Erlebnis. Jerome Bruner (2004: 692) writes about these dynamics when he suggests that autobiographical stories are ways of “world making” and, even more so, of “life making”. He stresses that the ways of telling and of conceptualising that come with life stories become so habitual that “they finally become recipes for structuring experience itself, for laying down routes into memory, for not only guiding the life narrative up to the present but directing it into the future” (Bruner 2004: 708). For Bruner, life as led becomes inseparable from life as told.

I agree with Bruner that the boundaries of life as led and life as told at times tend to become inseparable, but suggest that the emphasis should not be so much on the story,
or on life story as a text, as on the social process of storytelling, as opposed to the constructed nature of the story. It is the intersubjective moment of the telling that gives rise to a story and allows for experiences to be shared, felt and understood in new ways. Jackson characterises storytelling as a “coping strategy that involves making words stand for the world”, which allows for experiences to be changed, reshaped and lived through again, but in new ways (Jackson 2002: 18). It is in the telling that words and lives melt and create the possibility to not just narrate but also experientially rework ourselves. After the shift from life histories to life stories, my approach is thus informed by a move towards life storytelling.

The Politics of Life Storytelling

The term ‘life story’ can be confusing, as it has come to stand for a whole set of different practices. Within the growing body of publications in the field of forced migration that work with life stories, the vast majority use them as a means of interviewing and as a way of embedding personal experiences within the framework of a larger theoretical question.

Life storytelling as a method is not a straightforward ‘procedure’, ready to be packed into step-by-step guidelines. It moves beyond the realm of the life story interview and into the teller’s lifeworld – a movement that takes the listener along and makes her a constitutive part of the storytelling setting. I found myself confronted with the complexities of its dialogical nature from the beginning of my research. When I first met Halima to begin working on her life story, we were both guided by our own preconceptions about what such a thing could be. Our preconceptions, however, didn’t align straight away. While Halima was guided by the idea that this was going to be something like an interview, a question-and-answer type of conversation, my understanding was based on a vague idea of modern autobiographical narratives, influenced, perhaps, by the seemingly endless range of biographical texts that have become an important genre within the Western literary world. I had assumed that the teller of an autobiographical account has the ability to make a story out of a life, and is able to talk about her life in a unified and chronological way (Langness & Frank 1981: 101).
While I was expecting intricate and deep-reaching narratives, Halima was waiting for me to ask questions and trying to summarise her whole life as concisely as possible. During only two hours of that first storytelling session, we had raced through her entire life, revealing some of its main twists and turns and a body of information, but leaving the contours of her experiences untouched. In a similar way, after Omar read the transcripts of our first storytelling session, he demanded that my guidance be stronger so that his stories wouldn’t become derailed by his tendency to jump between different times and places. An even more dramatic difference in viewpoint emerged after my first recorded conversation with Mohamed. He told me that he didn’t want to have his story recorded in future meetings and suggested we think of alternative ways of using his story. I had already known him for almost a year and, because these talks felt like a conversation with a friend, I had been blind to the different situation we suddenly found ourselves in – the interview setting with me as the researcher and my recorder as my assistant. I hadn’t anticipated that the recorder could also work as a distancing device that could extinguish any sense of closeness between us. “I don’t know what exactly it is,” he said to me, “it’s just that I really despise this feeling that my voice will be kept somewhere.”

In these first encounters I was confronted with the need to free the life story from my preconceptions and take more seriously the intersubjectiveness of the storytelling situation. Storytelling does not take place in the safe solitude a novel is created in. It is the product of a social interaction between the teller and his audience. I couldn’t simply retreat into the role of a silent listener. As Walter Benjamin (2007: 97) explains, the listener’s relationship to the storyteller lies in his interest in retaining and retelling what is told. For the tellers to entrust me with their stories, stories that would be retold by me, we first had to create a place for them to be shared. This place was symbolical, a common ground we had to arrive at in order for the stories to become shareable. But it was also physical, a setting for the storytelling to evolve. In Omar’s case it was within the protective walls of his personal office space, a room he knew by heart. By coming to his office, I was invited to literally enter his place, a place he was in control of and where he felt most comfortable for his stories to be shared. In Halima’s case, the setting for the storytelling to literally take place was a small Iraqi kebab eatery next to the Somali mall in the Melbourne suburb of Footscray. While I became closely involved in
her life and she told me many stories without the voice recorder on, she chose a place away from her house and family life for the recorded storytelling sessions.

While my interest was in finding ways to re-tell the stories I listened to, all three storytellers chose different means or genres for narrating them. Omar, for example, captivated me with the elegance and poetry of his words. In line with many other great storytellers from different parts of the world, he embodied the characters that appeared and used the story to make the listener travel with him between places, countries and lifetimes. The main theme that ran through all of his stories however, was an urge to understand the social, political and emotional downfall of his country. In telling me his life story, he was not only telling me his own story, but the story of the Somali community in Melbourne and the fate of his people in Puntland. In formulating such a comprehensive portrayal, Omar was careful to create a balanced view, one that didn’t feed into the poisonous inter-clan dynamics that have created so much friction amongst Somalis – in Somalia as well as in Melbourne. At the same time, the telling of his story was also driven by the hope that it would work towards creating a place for Somali-Australians in the wider national narrative.

Mohamed used the interview settings mainly as an opportunity to exchange information about his life. He found it hard to think of his life in terms of a set of stories that would be retold. His reluctance to have his voice stored and to share the complexity and intimacy of his life with others points towards the limitations of life storytelling as a method. Storying one’s own life requires a large amount of commitment – emotionally, but also in terms of finding stories that are fit to be shared and heard by others. As a result, I dropped the idea of working on Mohamed’s experiences in terms of a life story. Months later, however, when I first saw the photos he had taken in Mogadishu, I was struck by their narrative strength. The photos showed skeletons of bombed out houses, gusts of dust in deserted streets, sheep grazing in the middle of the city and people rushing through the remnants of destroyed buildings. Going beyond the places’ bleak and sad surface, however, Mohamed began telling me stories of their former grace and beauty, and of the memories his images evoked. Through the photos, Mohamed was able to visually tell stories that were hard to find words for.
After our first somewhat confused attempt to work on Halima’s life story, I became so closely involved in her life that by the time I picked up the recorder again she had already told me many of the stories that were to become part of my thesis, lending the storytelling setting an intimate strength. Halima often said that telling me her stories gave her a feeling of relief. At the same time, her stories were also directed towards a very specific goal. She was telling her story for a younger generation of Somalis (especially women) growing up outside of Somalia, whom she wanted to understand the many struggles she had been through and the tactics she adopted to overcome them. Halima hoped that her stories would convey the sense of a Somaliness she was proud of to a younger generation that had never encountered it – a Somaliness that was marked by peace and interclan-solidarity. But like Omar, she also told her story for an Australian audience whom she wanted to understand better the complex journeys of Somalis in Australia. Halima’s story can be likened to what Lidwien Kapteijns, in the context of her work on the life story of the Somali woman Maryan Muuse Boqor, describes as an “exemplary narrative”, a story told by the narrator to serve as an inspiring example for others (Kapteijns 2009: 105).

While each storytelling session began with the rough idea of covering a specific time in the narrator’s life, none of the life stories developed chronologically or as a singular narrative or text. Instead, they were told to me in fragments, sometimes in form of anecdotes, sometimes prompted by specific questions I had after recapitulating things we had spoken about before, sometimes in relation to a story I had told about myself. Mostly, however, they were told as stories in their own right that in many ways linked back to other stories that had already been told. Instead of one coherent life story, Omar and Halima told me many stories of their lives. Linguist anthropologist Charlotte Linde (1993: 25) proposes that a life story isn’t simply a collection of stories, but that they relate to each other. She stresses that “when any new story is added to the repertoire of the life story, it must be related in some way to the themes of the other stories included in the life story, or at least it must not contradict them”. As a result, the stories that make up a life story are undergoing constant changes in order to express our current understanding of what our lives mean. “This property permits the life story to express our entire sense of what our lives are about, or our sense of what kind of people we are, without ever necessarily forming a single narrative that organizes our entire lives”,

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Linde (1993: 25) writes. In Halima’s and Omar’s case, the life storytelling process reflected some of the dynamics Linde identifies. Rather than framing their stories as one uniform and uninterrupted life story, they told me many stories. All these stories, however, were linked by the all-encompassing objective to create a picture of the experiences that shaped them into the persons they had become.

While Linde treats life stories as texts, as linguistic and discursive units that need to follow specific narrative conventions to fuse into a coherent grand narrative that eventually qualifies as a life story, I found that Halima and Omar, in telling me their stories, weren’t overly preoccupied with creating coherence in the overall narrative. They also used the stories as vehicles to create a sense of coherence in their own lives. Through the act of telling they came to relive moments and events in their lives that had shaped them – and by reliving them, these experiences were reshaped or re-emplaced in the here and now. Their stories were aimed at giving a sense of what moulded them into the people they had become. The vague idea of portraying ‘a life’ or ‘a person’ can thus be seen as the glue binding the many stories that spanned different lifetimes, places, people and events into something ‘whole’. At the same time, however, each story was important in itself; it allowed for the sense of wholeness to become interrupted by the many shifts, twists and movements that form our experiences of being-in-the-world. In doing so, their stories show how Omar and Halima actively made sense of the world. This, again, points towards the dynamics between wholes and parts in the storytelling setting: While life storytelling requires an understanding of the wholeness of a storied life, its genres, and the set of cultural rules and responsibilities that can guide both, the teller and the listener, it is also crucial to value its parts. As I demonstrate when I present Halima’s story in chapter IV, in the context of displacement and traumatic experiences it is equally important to respect missing links, silences and fragments. As Elinor Ochs and Lisa Capps (1997: 3) point out, a story is not just a story; “it is a struggle to formulate a life, a history, an ethics, especially a justification for actions realized and to come”.

The idea of a life story as chronological and whole from the onset doesn’t match the reality of a life storytelling setting. Most life stories are partial, and this partiality, and the missing links and contradictions, need to be respected as an essential part of their inner workings. It is not up to the researcher to become engaged in a forensics of
storytelling that attempts to meticulously piece together stories of a life into the fluent wholeness of a text. As Gaylene Becker points out in her work on the role of storytelling in the context of disrupted lives, there are good reasons for not telling everything there is to tell. Life stories are always accompanied by an internal editing process that works as a means of lending the story a greater sense of coherence and wholeness. This, in turn, also leads to a greater sense of self-consistency. What is edited out or left in, however, is often intimately linked to the cultural background of the narrator and to what she thinks can or cannot be part of a coherent story (Becker 1997: 28). The themes and events that found their way into Halima’s and Omar’s stories, as well as those that were left out, had much to do with their ideas of what constitutes a good or shareable story. Many of these ideas can be back to the way storytelling is constituted in the Somali setting.

Reflecting upon his visit to Somalia in the 1850s, the explorer Richard Burton celebrated a country that “teems with poets”. He enthusiastically noted that “every man has his recognized position in literature as accurately defined as though he had been reviewed in a century of magazines – the fine ear of this people causing them to take their greatest pleasure in harmonious sounds and poetical expressions, whereas a false quantity or prosaic phrase excites their violent indignation” (Burton quoted in S. Samatar, 1982: 55). In Somalia, storytelling is still at the heart of the country’s self-identification, and the past is still accounted for orally in stories, poems and songs. As the growing number of Somali poems distributed and disseminated worldwide through the internet and on CDs and DVDs shows, the role of poets and poetry in Somalia might have changed, but it hasn’t lost its crucial importance, specifically in the face of war and destruction (Andrzejewski & Andrzejewski 1993; Andrzejewski 2011; Kapteijns 2010).

Often in form of poems, the Somali orature goes beyond a mere retelling of historical events. As Said Samatar (1982: 55) shows in his book on the role of poetry in the making and remaking of a Somali national identity, poems play such an essential role in Somali society that people attach to it the “highest measure of importance”. Poets are not seen as esoteric people, or as outsiders to society, whose poems are recited solely to inspire men through the lyrical and beautiful. Instead, they are at the centre of political and social action and are drawn upon for their ability to inform, persuade and convince.
Traditionally, poetry was used as a principle vehicle of political power in Somalia. While there are specific poetical genres that give expression to personal emotion or passion, the ultimate concern of the Somali poet is “to influence the opinions of others towards a certain vital issue” (S. Samatar 1982: 57).

Although Halima and Omar grew up as part of the educated elite and although both of them were also influenced by Western ideas of autobiography, the poetics and politics of a Somali way of storytelling inform their stories. That Omar’s stories were so self-confident and often evolved around core political questions concerning Somalia’s condition can partly be explained by his position as a spokesperson and elder within the community of Somalis from the Puntland area in Melbourne. It is in this position that he regularly publishes articles disseminated through Somali websites that describe, analyse and comment on current political developments in Somalia and in the Somali diaspora. Like the most serious and politically loaded form of Somali poetry, the *gabay*, which is only performed by men and representatives of a clan, his stories reflect a persuasive effort to create political stability and harmonious relationships. Driven by this core effort, Omar’s stories paint nuanced pictures of the socio-political, historical, religious and economical dimensions that have shaped his personal trajectories. In taking on the role of the politically-minded storyteller, however, the emotional dimensions of life were pushed into the background: In his stories Omar rarely revealed his innermost feelings, creating the picture of a somewhat removed onlooker or commentator on his own life. This absence of emotionality might be related to the fact that in the Somali storytelling setting, speaking of personal emotions without making a politically, socially or universally relevant point is generally not seen as acceptable, specifically when the stories are told by older and respectable men (Kapteijns 2010: 30). The storytelling setting with me, a young woman, might have exacerbated these dynamics. At the same time, in the Somali context, stories usually don’t focus on the inner life of the storyteller because they are told to persuade and effect changes or forward solutions that go beyond the life of one individual (Kapteijns 2010: 31).

As John William Johnson (1996) and Lidwien Kapteijns (2011) have shown in their work on the Somali popular song, Somali modes of storytelling influence the political sphere – not only in a ‘traditional’ context. They were utilised by the anti-colonial national liberation movement in Somalia, as well as by the governments that followed. While the popular song is a relatively new development, it bears many similarities to traditional oral poetry. Both are characterised by a commitment to persuade, inform and aim for action and change.
For Omar, who doesn’t only tell the story of himself, but of his community, and who spends all his time and effort in finding ways to make Melbourne a home to this community, there were more important questions to dwell on than his inner life. Similar to the dynamics Renato Rosaldo (1976) described in his work on the life story of Tukbaw, a member of the Ilongot society in the Philippines, it was much more important to Omar to focus on his public self and on the role he represented within the wider political and social settings. Instead of centring his stories on groundbreaking emotional events in his life, such as his marriage, the birth of his children, or the arrival of his elderly mother in Melbourne, he found it more important to convey a sense of the overarching political and social dynamics he was confronted with and the ways he chose to deal with them. While he was keen for me and my readers to understand the struggles and journeys of Somalis in Australia, he often told me that he didn’t want his written story to deteriorate into a form of navel-gazing.

Halima’s stories, on the other hand, don’t shy away from entering emotional territory and also give insight into her inner life. Her stories bear the characteristics of the main genre of women’s storytelling in Somalia, the *buraanbur*. Whereas male storytellers are expected to contain their private feelings, emotional dimensions are an accepted part of female storytelling in Somalia. Women often use poetry and songs to speak of their hopes and dreams, struggles and fears. Halima’s stories were steeped in a poetics and rhythm that reflect many of the *buraanbur*’s conventions. The poetic tone in her stories can be linked to the fact that ever since the outbreak of the civil war she has been composing her own poems and songs. Just as the life storytelling session gave her a sense of relief, writing poems helped her to communicate the sadness and suffering she had experienced. As I show in more detail below, her poems sometimes found their way into the stories she told me. In letting her emotions become part of her songs and poems, Halima was able to reflect on her innermost feelings without turning her story into a confession – a mode of storytelling she found deeply embarrassing for the teller’s willingness to lay bare her most personal thoughts.

Although Halima gave insight into her inner life, there were also aspects she didn’t consider appropriate for a story that would be read by people she didn’t know. Stories that touched upon emotionally charged topics were often told to me as a friend, but underwent editing processes in the course of turning her stories into written texts. When
reading a draft of my first selection of stories, Halima felt uncomfortable. There were moments in our conversation when she had become oblivious to the fact that her stories would be shared with a wider audience in a written text. When reading the written stories, she became distressed about the idea of sharing certain details with a wider audience. In the Somali context, certain topics are acceptable to be discussed within the settings of a very specific audience (usually other females or family members), but in a public setting such topics are not tolerated as part of a ‘good’ story. During the act of the telling I had been Halima’s audience, and the intimacy of this setting allowed for aspects to be told that, in the context of the written text and its more public orientation, couldn’t be part of the story.

This strict division between stories that are fit for public consumption and those that can only be shared in a specific setting reminds me of an incident Lidwien Kapteijns witnessed at a Somali Studies Conference in London in 1993 (Kapteijns 2010: 25-26). An expert on Somali poetry who had collaborated with a noted Somali poet analysed some of his recent poetry that dealt with clan-based violence. When the scholar recited the lines, many Somali members of the audience became uneasy. Afterwards they expressed their anger over what they thought was an unacceptable transgression of storytelling rules on the side of the academic. They were angry that in this scholarly and public space, a space they shared with Somalis from different clans as well as with non-Somalis, they had been confronted with questions regarding their clan identity. They found that within this specific public setting, stories that targeted their clan identity should not be shared. While there are many songs and poems that narrate, celebrate or even ridicule clans, these stories are not thought fit to be shared in a public space. In a similar way, Halima felt that there were aspects of her story that could not be retold in another storytelling setting. We spent many hours going through my drafts, rephrasing some sentences and, on two occasions, editing out sections. As a result of these editorial processes, a few stories lost some of the intimate depth and details they had first carried. This was a price I was willing to pay. Over the course of the past two years, Halima has not just become a participant in my PhD project. Our lives have become closely intertwined, and like Ruth Behar (1993: 273) in the case of Esperanza’s life story, I was determined to respect Halima’s silences “as though they were her fiercest words”.

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The different poetic conventions deployed by Halima, Omar and Mohamed draw attention to the importance of creativity and beauty in life storytelling. As Mary Chamberlain and Paul Thompson (1998:1) point out in their introduction to *Narrative and Genre*, any life story is not only shaped by the reworking of experiences through memories, but also by art. My role as an anthropologist thus goes beyond that of a responsible listener. Like Ruth Behar I believe that there should also be an art to ethnography itself, that it “must be done with grace, with precision, with an eye for the telling detail, an ear for the insight that comes unexpectedly, with a tremendous respect for language, with a compassion for homesickness, and yes, with a love of beauty – especially, of beauty in places where it usually is not looked for” (Behar 1999: 477). In the writing and retelling of life stories an awareness of the *politics* of life storytelling is clearly essential, but it seems to me that a *poetics* of storytelling is just as important.

**The Poetics of Storytelling**

On the day of our first muddled life storytelling attempt, after I had turned off the audio recorder, Halima told me a story. I had talked to her about my father and about some of the stories he had told us kids; as a response, she told me a story she had grown up with. For its strength and strange beauty it has worked its way deep into my thoughts; just as the handprints of the potter on the clay vessel Benjamin described, it has left traces in my thinking and shaped my understanding of storytelling as a means of attending to humans as born of and into the world. While the story Halima shared with me wasn’t based on events she had lived through personally, it had become such an intricate part of her understanding that it had leaked into her own life and created ways of responding to the struggles she faced.

Halima’s story was set around the fireplace of a nomadic camp somewhere in Somalia. While all the men had gone away for a few days to find pastures for the cattle, a mother and her small child were left behind. It was in the middle of the dry season, when people were often forced to go without a meal for many, many days. The boy was starving and kept asking his mother for food. But she had nothing to cook. He began to wail and weep bitterly. After listening helplessly to her child crying for some time, the mother had an idea. She took a pot and filled it with water. She collected firewood and
made a fire. Once the fire was going, the woman placed the pot onto the fire. “You see?” she said to her hungry child. “I’m preparing the food for you now.” While the pot filled with nothing but boiling water was kept on the fire, she told her child many stories. Every time he asked for the food, she would say: “Just be patient, the food needs to be cooked first. Look, the water is already boiling!” She kept repeating this many, many times, until the boy fell asleep. The next day, early in the morning, the woman went around the camp, desperately looking for roots and leaves – anything she could cook. When the boy woke up, the food was already prepared. It was a meagre meal, but enough to feed him. The child, believing that it had been cooking all night, was happy.

After finishing the story, Halima told me that during times of extreme hardship she had often used it as a kind of guideline. When she was living in the United Arab Emirates, with five small children to feed and no knowledge of her husband’s whereabouts, she used the mother’s clever handling of the fearful and scary situation as a template to deal with an at times desperate situation in which she had no rights. “Look,” she said. “Sometimes I felt so hopeless and scared that I really wanted to give up. But I couldn’t, because I didn’t want my children to grow up with all this fear.” Whenever her children asked for special food or things she couldn’t afford, she would try to divert their attention, just like the mother in the story, by telling them that very soon she would get them what they were dreaming of. “And you know what?” she laughed. “Sometimes it took me a long time, but in the end I always gave my children what they were dreaming of.”

Halima’s story draws attention to the capacity of stories to create a sense of stability, even when the whole world seems to be in a state of violent imbalance. This story is also remarkable on account of its dialogical nature, its ability to travel all the way from the nomadic camp in Somalia, through the United Arab Emirates and finally into the Iraqi café in Footscray, where it left its traces on my own understanding of storytelling and displacement. While I couldn’t grasp the full meaning of this story straight away, sitting in that café with the smell of the kebabs cooking on the spits and the chatter and laughter of people eating their lunch surrounding us, Halima’s telling of the story moved something inside me instantaneously. This movement inside of me, a movement that grew out of an emotional involvement, was, I now think, a first step towards the beginning of a dialogue between us.
Just as the story can’t grow in utter silence and privacy, so does ethnographic reasoning not just happen in the mind of the scholar. Rather, Halima’s story and my reaction to it show that such reasoning is created through and in relation to the outside world, a world we share with others. Working with life storytelling as a method also requires finding a means of interpretation that underlines the intersubjective nature of knowledge creation. By interpretation I do not mean the interpretive explanation of life or culture as a text. Instead, the centrality of the dialogical nature of understanding (Verstehen) as put forward by phenomenological hermeneutic approaches to interpretation was at the core of my retelling of the stories Mohamed, Halima and Omar told me.

In developing this approach, I was guided by the work of anthropologists Maria-Barbara Watson-Franke and Lawrence Watson, who in the 1970s began outlining a phenomenological framework for the interpretation of life stories (see: Watson 1976; Watson 1978; Watson 1989; Watson & Watson-Franke 1975; Watson & Watson-Franke 1977; Watson & Watson-Franke 1985). They found the core idea of hermeneutical phenomenology – that we can only arrive at an understanding by bridging the chasms that separate our own from other people’s ways of making sense of the world – particularly helpful. An essential aspect of hermeneutics is the willingness to enter into a true dialogue, one that is based on a mutual agreement and on an attempt to understand the issues of concern to both the researcher and her participants (Watson 1976: 98-99). From a hermeneutical point of view, life stories are never knowable in an ultimate sense. The only possibility there is for the researcher is to be ready to at least suspend her insistence on categorisation and analysis. As researchers we need to “embrace what is being said as a production of the subject’s phenomenal consciousness” (Watson 1976: 118). A dialectical approach of interpretation therefore leads to a merging of context, or to an understanding of the life story as opposed to explaining it.

As the Watsons point out in their work, hermeneutics is principally concerned with the interpretive process that intervenes between the interpreter and that which is to be interpreted. Hans-Georg Gadamer, who elaborated Heidegger’s ontological hermeneutics, stresses that the understanding of something is always the result of an interpretive activity: “Interpretation is not an occasional additional act subsequent to understanding, but rather understanding is always an interpretation, and hence
interpretation is the explicit form of understanding.” (Gadamer 1975: 274) Understanding in the hermeneutic tradition thus isn’t in the nature of a procedure, which the interpreter simply imposes on the text, for the interpreter always enters the text through her pre-understandings. In order to interpret, we must break through the barriers that keep us separate from the text (Gadamer 1975: 263). This, Watson and Watson-Franke (1985: 41) point out, is only possible by entering into a dialogue with the text, even though our initial understandings never fully cease to play a role.

I have used the hermeneutic phenomenological idea of interpretation as a dialogical process as a guideline for writing and editing the stories Halima and Omar told me. At the same time, however, I refrained from the strong focus on life as a text as stressed by the hermeneutic tradition in anthropology. Rather, its core idea of the back and forth movements between different horizons (the horizon of the researcher and those of her participants) worked as a framework for me in understanding the life stories, while keeping my emphasis on the social process of storytelling rather than on narrative interpretation. The process of switching between different horizons is dependent on and guided by the relationships we build with the people who share their stories with us. In the context of my research, these three people weren’t just participants in my research project. Through the intimate process of telling and listening to each other’s stories, by becoming emotionally involved, our lives began to interweave and mingle, to cross and touch. At the heart of a poetics of storytelling is thus not just the interpretive back and forth between different horizons, but also the emotional state of being that forms an essential part of the fieldwork condition.

Once I understood emotions not as a hindrance to or an embarrassing side-effect of fieldwork, but as a crucial element of the dialogical nature of ethnographic work, I recognised the importance of letting the friendships I built up with Halima, Omar and Mohamed become part of my writing.10 Finding the poetic means of embedding some of the emotional landscapes that formed my understanding was even more important considering that, as I stressed at the beginning of this chapter, emplacement itself is a phenomenon that is deeply sensual. As an anthropologist who moved half-way around the world to write a thesis about people who, too, had come from somewhere else, the

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10In stressing the importance of emotionality, I am following anthropologists who have emphasised that emotions ought to be incorporated into anthropological epistemology (see: Devereux 1968; Crapanzano 1980; Jackson 1989; Wikan 1990; Behar 1996; Ulysee 2002; Goulet & Miller 2007; Davies & Spencer 2010).
field was also a place I sensed, felt and experienced in togetherness with others. Kirsten Hastrup (2010: 193) argues that entering the field also means incorporating a particular sense of place. It is impossible, she writes, “to separate the ethnography as written from the place as sensed”. While the fieldwork experience can be likened to a defamiliarising strategy in that it cuts the ethnographer loose from familiar neighbourhoods and landscapes, it also gives access to different senses of place. This highlights a relationship, which is, as Hastrup (2010: 193) puts it, “beyond words but within feelings”.

In finding ways of not just retelling the stories Omar, Mohamed and Halima had told me, but also bringing these moments that were beyond words but within feelings into my writing, it became crucial to make myself part of the thesis. This was not a means of demonstrating ‘reflexivity’; rather, it grew out of the dialogical and conversational nature of the fieldwork condition and out of the friendships I established and guided me in my movements towards understanding. Ghassan Hage (2009: 62) has commented that “drowning oneself in a sea of self-reflexivity” is hardly more anti-colonial, than the “desire to seriously reach out for otherness”. I agree with him and would add that this otherness can become a meeting point and common ground in that, albeit in different ways, we are all other and in many ways, we are same, too.

In embarking on a poetics of storytelling I needed to make this dialogical situation, this back and forth, this moving towards a shared humanity part of the writing of my thesis. The task was to find ways of weaving in and out of what Jackson (2010: 49) describes as the three horizons of the hermeneutic circle: that of one’s own world, that of the society one seeks to understand, and that of humanity. My thesis can – hopefully – be read as a dialogue between these three horizons, as it interweaves the stories of Halima, Mohamed and Omar with my own experiences, resulting in a constant movement towards the existential dynamics of emplacement.

Because Halima and Omar didn’t necessarily aim for a coherent grand narrative representing a life story but told me many stories about themselves instead, I found it crucial to let these dynamics also enter my writing. As a result I have not attempted to edit the many stories into a singular life story. Instead, I chose to focus on a number of stories, centred on crucial moments or experiences that shaped and defined Omar’s and
Halima’s lives. In my attempt to strike a balance between wholes and parts, however, I tried not to over-concentrate on the stories as singular parts and thereby lose sight of the sense of wholeness of ‘a life’ or ‘a person’ both Halima and Omar, in telling their stories, were also trying to convey. I therefore ordered the stories that became part of the thesis chronologically to allow the reader to literally follow Omar and Halima through some of the ups and downs of their lives and gain a stronger sense of them as persons.

Not all the stories made their way into my thesis, and the decisions about what to leave out were sometimes painful and hard. But the act of retelling stories in a written form must follow its own poetics of storytelling, or, as Behar suggests in the case of Esperanza, “when I am done cutting out her tongue, I will patch together a new tongue for her” (Behar 1993: 19). This process of patching together a new tongue, however, required Omar’s and Halima’s input. Both of them read and commented on the versions I had written, suggested changes, and, in Halima’s case, also asked me to take out things that she felt misrepresented her and sometimes added layers that she thought were needed. Halima’s and Omar’s verbatim stories that became part of this thesis are thus not exact reproductions of the stories I recorded. While I was determined to stay as close to the transcripts as possible, I was confronted with the difficulty that sometimes elements that work well in the telling of a story do not translate easily into a written text. Omar, who had read transcripts of the recorded storytelling sessions from the first day we met, pointed out the necessity for editorial steps early on. He was keen to have his story written in a comprehensive and balanced way, to eliminate grammatical mistakes, repetitions and unnecessary detours which, as he found, weakened his voice. And while Halima didn’t read the transcripts, from our first recorded storytelling session she told me that she was keen to have a say in the written outcomes of her stories.

The first-person narratives that feature in this PhD have undergone a set of editorial processes. First, they represent only a selection of the entire body of stories Omar and Halima told me. This choice was driven by an interest in shedding light on crucial events that speak of the existential dynamics of displacement and emplacement. Second, and following this selection process, the stories underwent another level of editing, in that I ordered them chronologically. While both Halima and Omar, in telling me their
stories, largely followed a chronological order, beginning from their childhood and ending with their lives in Australia, they didn’t always strictly stay within one timeframe. Sometimes they jumped back and forth between different times, a characteristic that works well in the telling of a story – especially with a larger body of stories against which to understand these jumps – but can create a confused and patchy impression when read as a text. The idea to stay with the main chronological order we had also followed in the telling and leaving out the detours and jumps ahead was essentially an attempt to take seriously Halima’s and Omar’s concerns that their written stories should follow an aesthetics of storytelling. This, in a third step, also led to editorial changes to the stories: After I had chosen and ordered the stories I made minor changes that allowed the texts to flow smoothly. After reading these written versions of their stories, Halima and Omar both suggested further editorial steps. Omar, who had been reading his transcripts all the way along, was content with the stories and only pointed out spelling mistakes. As pointed out before, Halima’s stories underwent a few changes.

The retelling and interpretation of the stories followed both an aesthetics and politics of life storytelling. That such a project is close to the phenomenological tradition has been shown by Gaston Bachelard, who argued in the *The Poetics of Space*, in which he embarked upon a philosophy of poetry, that rather than being a phenomenology of the mind, poetry is a phenomenology of the soul (Bachelard 1994: xx). For its strength and its capacity to transport us out of psychological explanations of humans and into an understanding for what it means to be human, Bachelard stresses that poetry should even be regarded as a guiding principle for phenomenology. He quotes the Dutch phenomenologist J.H. van Berg, who wrote that “Poets and painters are born phenomenologists” (Berg 1955 quoted in Bachelard 1994: xxviii). In fact, I suggest that the project of writing and retelling is at the heart of life storytelling as a method and as part and parcel of the sense of wholeness that constitutes the ethnographic project. I believe that often the poetic eye can better reveal experiences in all their nuances, where the academic eye might find it hard not to get lost in elucidations, explanations and representations. Taking into the account the many layers of experience that form our understanding of place, using a poetic means of making sense of such complexity becomes even more feasible, because stories that follow a poetics in the telling can form
landscapes or places in their own rights. As John Berger, commenting on a sonnet by George Herbert, points out, sometimes a poem can become a place, a dwelling, with the words forming “the stones of a habitation” which surrounds us (Berger 1996: 124). As I show in the next chapter, sometimes, these storied landscapes can also take on shapes that refuse people’s dwelling in them. In such moments, the pain and deeply felt loss of displacement comes to the fore.

That very first afternoon when I met Halima in the Footscray café to begin working with her, when for a split second I feared that my idea of life storytelling had ended before I had started to understand it, the subtlety and beauty of the children’s story Halima shared with me gently brought me back again. Rather than looking for a grammar or language to translate the inner workings of stories, I recognised an obligation towards Omar, Mohamed and Halima to find a way of developing a poetics of ethnographic writing and searched for ways to celebrate the beauty and strength of the stories that didn’t just constitute my fieldwork but had also created friendships that will last long after the field has receded.
Returning from Mogadishu, Mohamed often talked about how strange it was that everyday life seemed to continue as normal – that people, in the midst of all the conflict, the chaos and the fear, still inhabited the place. Over the years of war, the once unified city had disintegrated into a series of embattled clan enclaves. Every step in the wrong direction, every crossing of an invisible boundary, every word to the wrong person was potentially dangerous. The place seemed to have broken into countless parts, as if it had become de-placed. And yet, life unfolded in the strangest ways and under the greatest pressures. With the persistence of people, with their stories, their hopes and imaginations, places like Mogadishu, places that appear so lost, do not simply disappear.

Mohamed took this photo driving past a little market in the middle of Mogadishu. Because he took the image from a moving car, it carries a strange sense of fleetingness – as if not only the photographer but everyone in the picture is ready to pack up and run off at any moment. “I was interested in this, because with all the chaos and destruction –
this still goes on,” Mohamed explained. “People are still buying and selling.” Although the traders have to make do with the few things they could find to sell, the sight of the few humble stalls gave Mohamed the impression that at least in some corners of the city life went on as normal. Pointing at the children gathering around the table on the left hand side of the image, he noted: “For someone like this kid, for all these kids in fact, probably this is all they know. Because they were born at a time when all they experienced was this. So to them it’s normal. But to me it’s abnormal because I remember what this place was like.”

Mohamed, who had left the place so many years ago, this corroded Mogadishu and its inner workings felt alien. What had become normal to its inhabitants was abnormal to him. What had become normal to Mohamed was out of reach of the normality of those living in Mogadishu. Still, coming past the little market place, seeing people setting up stalls, selling the few things they could find, let some of the habits of the place he remembered, the inhabited place, shine through. It reminded Mohamed of the liveliness of Mogadishu, a place that somehow, despite all its wounds, was still home. He was nineteen when he had last seen the city. “And look at my age now,” Mohamed said. “I was not even half of my age now, so it was not significant – but it is because it still is home.”

So what is this, ‘home’? What allows a place like Mogadishu to remain significant in Mohamed’s life after so many years, despite all the changes that have made it hard to comprehend the place and its inhabitants the way he once used to? What does it mean to be emplaced?
III
EMPLACEMENT
1.

PLACING SOMALIA

Meeting Omar

I was waiting for Omar in front of the blocks of council flats in Melbourne’s inner suburb of Carlton. I looked around, wondering what it must be like to live on the twentieth floor of one of these buildings. The old nineteen-seventies-style towers have a strange presence, their greyness making them stand out from the neatly renovated Victorian terrace houses that surround them. Hundreds of windows give a hint of the many people that live there. And yet, the windows appear to be empty, as if the building is jealously making sure that it discloses no one but itself.

A tall, friendly man came up to me. “Hello,” he said, “welcome to Australia! I’m Omar.”

Omar is a spokesperson for the Somalis living in and around the Carlton flats. His NGO Horn Afrik is based in an office on the ground floor of one of the buildings. “Whenever there are problems or requests, be it from the police, the government or other organisations, they come and speak to me,” he explained, inviting me to sit down. I had received his phone number from a community worker who told me that Omar might be able to help me find Somali participants for my PhD project. He had many questions about my PhD and about my own journey from Austria to Australia. “Life story, can you explain to me what that means?” he asked me. I told him that I will meet up with the participants often, that I will ask them to tell me about their lives, about their childhood, their journey to Australia and anything that is of importance to them. “So you don’t just ask questions for once and then we never hear from you again?” he asked and told me about the many researchers who had come and gone, leaving the community without ever letting them know about the results of their research. I told him that I would share my thesis with my participants, that I was planning to work with only a small group of people, that I wanted to get to know them well and acknowledge their stories.
“All right,” he said, “do you want to start the interview?” Having come with the expectation that Omar would help me to find others to interview, I was surprised by this turn. I told him that I didn’t have my digital recorder with me and suggested that it might be better for me to come back in a couple of weeks to give him time to think about a topic we could start with. “That’s right,” Omar laughed “because I have a lot to tell you. So many countries I went through, Saudi Arabia, India, Australia... I have a lot of stories to tell you.”

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I was born in Puntland in Somalia. Particularly, I was born in the northeast of Somalia, in a town called Gardo. I grew up in an area where most of the people were from my clan, or my sub-clan, the Majerteen. The people who lived on the right side were from my clan, the people who lived in front of our house were from my clan, the people who lived behind our house were from my clan, the people who lived on my left side were from my clan. And I grew up with the attitude that there is nothing in this world except my clan.

And I didn’t open my eyes properly until I moved to Mogadishu, where there are so many different clans. Then I went to the Middle East, to Saudi Arabia, and I learned more about Somalis and their culture and where they come from and that there is nothing like a group that is more superior than others. In fact, where I grew up the majority was Majeerteen, who are a sub-clan of the Harti or Darood. My main clan, the Darood, is divided into sub-clans of which the Majerteen is one. The Somali clan system is like an onion: When you take one layer, there is another layer, you take that layer and then there’s another layer, and so on.

The Darood happened to be those who used to run the country for a long time. I think what really helped them to emerge stronger than others was their relationship with other civilizations. If you check the map – the northeast has a close proximity to the Middle East. So people from my region used to travel to the Middle East, and they used to go to Asia, to Indonesia and Malaysia. When
the Europeans arrived in Somalia they started to work with the local authorities. The Darood’s cooperation with the newly arrived Europeans gave them more power and more openness to governance, administration and so forth. And eventually, when the Europeans left the country, they handed the power over to them. Unfortunately the colonial system didn’t help anyone. What really transpires now is that the territory mainly occupied by the Darood is more stable than the south, where they are actually fighting over the power.

So that’s the kind of life I come from. However, if you read in the history books, you will see that the dictator Siyaad Barre, the leader of the regime from 1969 to 1991, was also Darood, but that he started to turn against the Majeerteen, who were a sub-clan of the Darood, purely because the Majeerteen were running the country before him.

Where I grew up, some people were fishermen, and some were farmers, but the main income came from livestock. They exported livestock to all Middle Eastern countries and that was their major income. Now fishery came into life because in the northeast of Somalia we’ve got the largest stock of tuna in the whole world. Recently you could see the price for tuna going up in Europe after the pirates started to operate in Somalia. And actually the pirates originally came from the fishing people whose fishing was destroyed by large European fishing trawlers.

I had sixteen brothers and sisters. My father married more than two wives. Even though polygamy was very common, I think my father was more energetic compared to many other people. He also was wealthy, so he was capable to marry more than once. But in accordance with the religion he was never married to more than four women at the same time. My mother is from a different sub-clan than my father. When I was a child it was very common in Somalia to marry a woman who didn’t belong to your immediate clan. The reason was to bring the clans together. So the woman used to be the bridge between the clans, because intermarriage brings the people together – in-laws, nephews, all these create a situation where regardless which clan you are from, the people are becoming closer.
My father was a businessman. He used to work for different companies that were running the fish industry in the northeast of Somalia, owned by the Italian and Somali governments. He was the CEO and used to go to the Middle East or Italy. He spent most of his time either in Italy, Yemen or Mogadishu. Because of his business duties I could hardly see my father until he retired.

So that’s how the make-up of my family worked. We children are from different mothers, but we consider each other to be brothers and sisters. Many of my brothers and sisters have died.

I was born in 1960, the year Somalia became a nation state. So I grew up in a governmental system. But I can see now that why we have never been rule-abiding citizens is because of our background. There was no system that centralised us. It is the fragmented system that keeps us apart; everyone lives in his own world.

My father always advised me: “You are Somali, that’s the end of the road. Your main clan are the Majerteen and that’s all you have to learn about it.” He was always telling me that what you learn and what you achieve personally will help you and not what clan A or clan B has or has not. My father was different, but within the wider society the clan issue was always there.

I think that what put us into the position we are in today is purely the clan. If all the people who see themselves as Somali accepted anyone as a Somali, without any discrimination, without any further investigation of which sub-clan he is, we wouldn’t be in the position we are in today. And it’s also true that there was abuse in some of the clans. That’s why the image of the clan was becoming an issue. The people were led to believe that the only way you can survive is to have a leader from your clan in the highest seat of the nation. That’s why they’re fighting over the power. Many of the clans, like my clan, they were not even allowed to have a passport let alone anything else. When I left Somalia, I changed my name and my identity to get a passport.

Somalia, it’s not the Somalia that it used to be, the people are not the people that I used to know. The clan, it always used to be the clan but not the clan that
created fences between the people. Now we’ve got clans that create fences when it comes to intelligence, when it comes to understanding, when it comes to assessing something.

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**Like a Bird in a Cage**

I left Puntland to go to university in Mogadishu in 1976. I was studying fisheries. It’s funny, there were two reasons why I chose to learn fisheries: One was that my family had a background in the fishing industry. But the main reason was that the university I chose was the only one where they taught English in the mainstream subjects. I was trying to find somewhere where I could improve my English skills. I had this dream that one day I will leave the country and work in a non-Somali speaking country.

For me going to university was a stepping-stone. I didn’t want to stay in Somalia, I didn’t see Somalia to be a country that could respond to my needs. And also going overseas was very popular in my age. It was the talk of the day about who went where and who was doing what and the kind of life that they had.

We used to watch the *Dallas* movies all the time, movies about these American oil millionaires who put all values and morals aside and were more focused on money. This kind of Hollywood fiction impacted us to some extent. We were not necessarily impacted by their actions but by the life that they had: The roads, the lights, the shining things, the freedom, the fact that they lived in a clean, nice place. So we thought: “This is what I want to get, this is where I want to go!” I wanted to drive that kind of car, I wanted to drive that car in that kind of road, that highway, I wanted to dress in that kind of way – with ties and shoes and shirts and jackets and all this. Why shouldn’t I have this in my country? If I had that in my country I wouldn’t need to go anywhere else.

And again, the country was not providing us young people with what we needed: The employment, the income, the stability, the discrimination against particular clans and so on. At that time Siyaad Barre was discriminating and
arresting, and turning against all Majeerteen, especially when they attempted to do a coup and the coup was not successful, so many of them were killed, many of them were arrested, many of them left the country.

So I was like someone who was in a cage. You know, if you have a bird in a cage, it always wants to get out of that cage. As soon as you open it: pieeeew, it will fly! That’s exactly what happened to us.

I think in Somalia there were three categories of emigrants: those who smelled and started to run, those who actually became victims and as a result ran and those who finally got into the mess and tried to go somewhere else. I was in the group of those who smelled before the war actually started to come to the surface. And I left the country. I was nineteen years old when I left Somalia.

I left Somalia eight months before my graduation. That was very bad! Going north was more important to me than finishing university in Somalia – at least in my view at that time. It was wrong. Just because I had all these dreams you will never really experience – theoretically maybe, but not in reality.

My father died in 1991 in Mogadishu, in a natural way. The last time I saw him was in 1983 when I was leaving Somalia. He advised me not to leave the country and go overseas; he was not one of those people who believed that you should migrate to other countries because he believed you would become a minority. And he was right. I did my BA and Masters and the job I am doing is not the job that I should be doing. I wouldn’t be doing this kind of job if I were in Somalia. I wouldn’t be less than a minister in Somalia.

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Creating a Common Ground

When I began listening to Omar’s life story, neither of us was sure how to approach the dizzyingly large task of storying one’s life. I had the idea of letting the story unfold, *letting* it happen rather than *making* it happen, but I did not verbalise this idea in our first meetings. And Omar, who as a spokesperson for the Somali community in
Melbourne is often approached by journalists, local politicians or community workers, had his own ideas about what he wanted to tell me. I had told him about the reasons behind my decision to focus on life stories, but we didn’t go much further in thinking about how and where to begin. Looking back now, I think that we were preoccupied with getting to know each other as friends, which made the technicalities of planning what was to come seem out of place. Instead of discussing our ideas of life stories, we started by simply telling each other about our lives. I told Omar about my family, about our complicated history of movements between the Netherlands and Austria and about my impressions of Australia. Omar told me about his family, his children, his work, his life in Melbourne. From our first conversations it became clear that while Omar was a very thoughtful person, he also liked to see things from a humorous side. We laughed about the fact that Somalis all seem to have such similar names. “If you talked to another Somali here in Melbourne about me, he would probably have no idea which Omar Farah you are talking about,” he said. “But people would immediately recognise me by my family’s nickname ‘Dhollawa’.” “What does it mean?” I asked. Omar began to laugh. “It means something along the lines of ‘the one with the chipped tooth’,” he explained. His family had inherited the nickname from his grandfather who had a missing tooth. Omar told me how in Somalia, people often received their nicknames after distinctive physical marks or events in their families or lives. He told me that nicknames such as ‘the one-legged one’ or ‘the one whose brother was killed in a car accident’ were very common. “Here in Australia that would be unthinkable!” he laughed. “You can’t call a disabled person ‘one-legged’.” Sitting in his office, the soundscape of the busy Nicholson street intersection outside leaking through the little window and listening to Omar joking about his nickname, I lost my initial insecurity over how to start working on a life story. At some point I asked Omar whether it was alright with him if I started recording our conversations. He didn’t object, and I turned the voice recorder on.

By sharing a few details of our lives with each other, by revealing some of the things that moved, amused and appalled us, we slowly came to know each other. By getting to know each other better we also worked towards a common ground, a place where stories could be told and retold. Instead of letting Omar’s story happen, we were both preoccupied with creating the conditions for making the telling of a story possible. This
process of creating a common ground shouldn’t be thought of as an intellectual exchange, as something we consciously thought through. Rather, it was shaped by simple things and habits we had to get accustomed to, such as the spatial settings of our encounters in Omar’s office, the rhythm, language and tone of the telling and the moments when we drifted from friendship-talk to recorded life storytelling.

The stories Omar told me in our first encounters are marked by the dynamics of this search for a common ground. Conversational in character, they moved back and forth between different times and places and painted a detailed picture of the complex and multiple layers that marked the Somalia Omar had grown up in. For many hours he explained to me the different dynamics that had shaped his hometown Gardo, the Puntland area and the Somali nation state. He told me about the history of his clan, the Majerteen, how, in the eighteenth century it established the Majerteen Sultanate, which existed until the early twentieth century and extended as far as central Somalia. He also told me about the complex interplay between the different clans and how, growing up, he witnessed the slow disintegration of the Somali nation state. Yet, in the stories Omar told me in our first encounters, he didn’t stage himself as the central character, as the main subject of the narrative. In the two stories I chose for the opening of this chapter, he provides a context for his childhood, his family’s makeup and his decision to leave Somalia, but he doesn’t offer much insight into his personal life. Instead, Omar was preoccupied with placing himself within the broader political and social forces that formed his personal journey. His story travels from the way his clan shaped him, and how the clan was in turn shaped by the outside world, to his desire to leave Somalia, a place he feels has lost itself. Touching on the traces left behind by pastoralism, colonialism, dictatorship and war, the narrative also travels through different times. By telling the story, Omar takes us with him to the place of his childhood Somalia, to different features of the social landscape that formed him. In travelling through different times, he also takes us to the lost place that Somalia has become for him. As he tells its story, we are invited to follow Omar in his attempt to make sense of the country’s disintegration. At the same time, we begin to grasp the importance of the specific places he mentions – Gardo, Mogadishu, and the nation state Somalia – not just in terms of how they were, but also of their role in constituting who Omar has become.
I chose the two opening stories for their ability to place Omar – within his family, his clan, his hometown, and within the different dynamics that mark his relationship to Somalia. While they only represent a fraction of the body of stories he told me in these first encounters, they are representative of the tone, themes and rhythm through which the storytelling began to take shape. When I listened to the stories Omar told me in our first encounters, I was struck by the detail and mindfulness that marked his telling. On the one hand, this emphasis might reflect the Somali politics of storytelling I mentioned before, which, while acknowledging the importance of personal experiences, is bound to always return to wider communal or sometimes even universal questions. But was his emphasis on wider socio-political events perhaps also a way of trying to come to terms with the difficulty of telling stories about a childhood or a past in a place that has undergone such violent and destructive change? Omar could speak about growing up in Somalia, but he couldn’t tell a story that is oblivious of the place it has become since then. He wanted me to listen carefully and understand that the Somalia he grew up in doesn’t exist anymore, and he wanted me to appreciate all the complexities that led to his decision to leave.

I chose the two opening stories also because most other stories Omar told me in our first encounters were marked by large jumps between different times and themes, and upon reading the first transcripts Omar said that he felt uncomfortable with turning such unpolished narratives into written texts. Many of these stories evolved around the place that had become the embodiment of Somalia’s forlornness for him – Mogadishu. Like Mohamed, he talked about the city’s former beauty and sophistication, about its cosmopolitan flair, about the carefree and fun times he had there as a young student, strolling through the bustling streets and making new friends wherever he went. Yet, in his stories, nostalgic moments never persisted for long. Omar couldn’t look back towards the past ignoring what had happened afterwards – he couldn’t look at a then, disregarding the now. As a result, his stories constantly jumped back and forth. While this jumpiness doesn’t read well in a written text, in the moment of the telling it opened a window for me to begin seeing some of the reasons behind Omar’s focus on political and social dynamics rather than on personal events. It also made me understand the way displacement and storytelling can be experienced like two equal magnetic poles: Whilst
constantly trying to find ways to connect, the forces to drive them apart remain ever stronger.

**Storying a Dust-State**

The Mogadishu Omar’s stories described was characterised by chaos, loss and displacement. It was a place that had become emptied of itself and its inner meanings to such a degree that he literally described it as dissolving into nothing but dust: “Mogadishu used to be very nice,” Omar told me. “And when I see the documentaries from Mogadishu now, I really cry. If you watch Mogadishu and really know Mogadishu, you say: Actually, this is a dust-state. It really is a dust-state. Because all the streets that you knew are gone, all the buildings that you knew are just rubbish, broken, the windows are taken, the roof has been taken. The nice roads that used to run through the middle of the city have become abandoned – trees have grown there! Instead of two ways, one on the right and one on the left, there’s nothing left. The cars go their way, they just drive wherever they can find some space, because the trees are growing here or there. Hopeless! I cannot understand it.”

While listening to Omar, the difficulty and pain of telling stories of a place disintegrating into dust was palpable. How to story such a place: where human habits and rules have made way for wilderness; where beauty has been replaced by piles of rubbish; where roofs, built to protect and shelter people, have fallen down on them; and where there is no right or left anymore, for there is nothing left? The place Omar pictures, a place that ceases to have loveable habits, refuses narration. If as Walter Benjamin (2007: 83-84) has suggested, stories grow from experience, the experience of being in a place like Mogadishu, a place where violence and destruction mark people’s everyday life, cannot be shared. The dust-state Omar describes reminds me of the Gelände (‘terrain’) Paul Celan writes about in his poem Engführung (‘The Straitening’). In many of his poems Celan, a German speaking Romanian Jew whose parents died in a Nazi concentration camp in the Ukraine, expresses the idea that after experiences of such destructive force, place and landscape cease to be narratable. As a result, he attempted to find means to re-write the genre of the landscape poem. In ‘The Straitening’ he writes about a soulless terrain, a de-placed place where the
contemplative distance between the self and the setting that makes experience possible is shattered (Baer 2000: 226).

Driven into the
terrain
with the unmistakable track:

Grass, written asunder. The stones, white,
With the shadows of grassblades:
Read no more – look!
Look no more – walk!\(^{11}\)

The terrain Celan writes about refuses to be understood experientially in the way we make sense of a place. It carries the burden of a shattered self, a shattered place, a shattered world, where nothing makes sense anymore. This dark, lifeless terrain represents the opposite of the idyllic sense of rootedness in place praised in the work of so many German poets. Instead, it speaks of the destruction of the links between self, place and identity. Like Celan, Omar found it difficult to find words for a place that had been struck by such painful events – so difficult indeed, that he refrained from indulging in reminiscences of Mogadishu’s past beauty. He told me that he and his Somali friends often remind each other not to get lost in nostalgic memories of the old Mogadishu, the Mogadishu they had loved so much and which, for so many Somalis, represents the hope of a unified nation. “People are telling me: ‘Look, the Mogadishu that you have in mind is not there anymore,’” Omar told me. “It’s gone. Dead and buried. Unfortunately the people who took over Mogadishu forcefully from Siyaad Barre did nothing except for physically burying the Somalis’ name and reputation, putting it in a grave and then leaving it. Now anything and everything bad can be related to Somalia, anything and everything that you can think of. Why? Somalia used to be a well-respected country in the international community. Where is it now?”

Omar’s description of Somalia as an abandoned graveyard and his question why this had happened made me shiver. At the same time it also made me grasp why he had spent so many hours telling me about the political and social order of the place he had

\(^{11}\) Translation by Ulrich Baer (2000)
left behind. Listening to his Mogadishu stories I began to understand that Omar hadn’t just left Somalia behind. Somalia had also left itself and its inner workings behind. The place had actually completely lost itself and disintegrated into something he could not experientially make sense of anymore. It was exactly this – the urge to understand what had happened to Somalia, how a well-respected country could deteriorate into a ‘dust-state’ – that drove Omar’s stories. Being here, in his office in Melbourne, and not there, where things were so violently falling apart, created a distance that seemed impossible to bridge. Rather than telling stories of his childhood, his family and his inner transformations, Omar’s stories were attempts at bridging the gap between the Somalia he knew and understood by heart and the hopeless Somalia he didn’t understand anymore. By piecing together how Somalia had fallen apart, Omar was also piecing together his own sense of displacement from it. At the same time, his urge to understand the lost place Somalia had become to him can also be read as an urge to give it a new meaning, and by doing so to re-emplace it within the realms of his present life.

Commenting on the transcripts of the first storytelling session I had sent him to read, Omar said that the way he sees Somalia today had to be understood in the context of the different experiences he had after leaving it behind. It had to be read against the backdrop of his whole life story, of the many experiences he had had – in Somalia and beyond. “All this has in one way or another shaped my life,” he said, “it shaped the way I see things, shaped how I am seen by others or how I see them regardless of what I used to believe when I was growing up in my mother’s lap, or my mother’s backyard, or my clan’s environment.” Thus in our first storytelling sessions – encounters that were marked by our attempts to find a common ground – Omar wanted me to listen and understand the complexity of the many layers that led to his being here, in his office in Melbourne telling his story to me, a young researcher, about a there that had become so ungraspable and that was present and distant at the same time.

Following Omar’s urge to understand and make me understand, I take his account as a means of looking into some of the complexities of the Somalia he was trying to picture. While his stories allow me to shed some light on the wider socio-political dynamics he wanted me and the readers of this thesis to understand, it also allows for a better understanding of the context that sets the scenes for both Omar’s and Halima’s stories.
A Place Called Somalia

The task of explaining Somalia’s present condition is daunting. As Said Samatar (2010: 209) argues, in a Somalia that has become barren, even the once so highly respected poets have fallen silent. Prominent among those few literary figures who are still telling stories about Somalia is Nuruddin Farah. Many of his stories deal with the displacements that marked his life. Forced to flee to Somalia from the Ethiopian-ruled and Somali inhabited Ogaden region after Somalia’s independence, and from there forced into exile in 1976, after upsetting the Barre regime, Farah has carefully observed his country’s demise from the position of an outsider. In his trilogy *Links, Knots* and *Crossbones*, Farah attempts to make sense of the place called Somalia. In *Links*, he tries to describe the multiple causes that led to his country’s destruction: “A poet might have described Somalia as a ship caught in a great storm without the guiding hand of a wise captain. Another might have portrayed the land as laid to waste, abandoned, the women widowed, the children orphaned, and the sick untended. A third might have depicted it as a tragic country ransacked by madmen driven by insatiable hunger for more wealth and limitless power. So many lives pointlessly cut short, so much futile violence.” (Farah 2004: 15)

Just like Omar in his opening story, Nuruddin Farah attempts to make sense of Somalia’s situation by piecing together the interplay of forces that left the place
shattered. Colonialism, dictatorship and cold war rivalries have all left their traces on a country where the majority of the population shares a language, an ethnicity and a religion. But while Somalia is often portrayed as a unitary nation, the idea of the clan takes over an ambiguous role, with divisive effects. Omar says that he grew up believing that there was nothing else in the world except his clan. But he also wants to make it clear that his view underwent a substantial change, particularly after he had left his hometown Gardo, where the Majerteen were the majority. Looking back at the Somalia he grew up in, Omar sees the clan as one of the major contributors to the country’s demise.

Omar visualises the Somali clan system as an onion, with the main clans forming the skin, which, when peeled back, opens up layer upon layer of different sub-clans that divide into smaller and smaller sections. Academics and clan elders often make use of the symbol of the tree to explain the ordering of the Somali nation (for example: Lewis 1978, 1994; Mansur 1995, 2004; Luling 2006). The top of the tree is formed by the mythological figure Hiil, to whom all Somalis are related through their affiliation to one of his two sons Samaal and Sab. The majority of the Somalis are Samaal, who are traditionally nomadic pastoralists from northern Somalia. The main clans that belong to this branch of the ‘genealogical tree’ are Omar’s main clan, the Darood, as well as the Dir, Isaaq and Hawiye. The sedentary Sab form a smaller part of the population and the second branch of the tree. They live primarily in the south as agriculturalists, with the Digil and Rahanweyn as the main agropastoral clans.

These boundaries are often blurred, however, as some pastoralists temporarily make use of cropping in times of hardship, while sedentary cultivators often also keep livestock (Horst 2006: 47). The boundaries are also blurred by numerous minority groups who exist beyond the main division, such as the Tumal, Midgan, Eyle, Yahar and Yibr in the north and the Jareer (or Bantu) in the south. The fact that many Somalis migrated to towns and cities and move between the boundaries of Samaal and Sab creates a more dynamic picture of the country. The often reproduced stereotypical image of ‘the Somali’ as a nomadic pastoralist, moving freely from place to place, ignores the changing realities of a nation that over the last five decades has become fully embedded in the world market. Nor does it do justice to the many people who, like Omar, grew up in urban areas or the many people who leave the harsh nomadic lifestyle behind and
flock to the cities. It does not acknowledge the fact that “[a]lthough it is possible to
identify ‘home areas’ that reflect the strongholds and traditional locations of the
different Somali clans, in actual fact there is a great mix of people from different clans
living together in different places” (Horst 2006: 46).

The centrality of clanship in the representation of Somalia has been influenced by the
work of British anthropologist I.M. Lewis. In his classic texts on northern Somali
society, he describes tol, patrilineal descent, xeer, Somali customary law, and Islam as
the three pillars of pre-colonial Somalia’s social organisation (Höhne 2006: 399). In his
first article, published in 1957, Lewis characterises the Somali genealogical system as
“total genealogy”, a characterisation that has since then dramatically shaped the way
Somalis are seen (Lewis 1957). As Lee Cassanelli (2010: 54) explains, Lewis’ total
genealogy “provides a mental map which enables Somalis – and the ‘experts’ who study
them – to explain both the solidarity and the segmentation which have characterised
Somali society through much of its recent history”.

Through the ‘total genealogy’ every Somali can identify how closely or remotely they
are related to other lineages on the ‘family tree’. Lewis suggests that civil associations
along one’s clan-lines and loyalty to one’s lineage are the defining characteristics of
Somali politics and social life. He stresses that while Somalis believe that they are one
people with a shared origin and history, there are also cleavages which often divide
them in politics and everyday life. Lewis believes that in the harsh struggle for survival
faced by Somali pastoralists, suspicion and at times hostility between lineage groups
must be seen as a ‘natural attitude’, since the groups are competing for access to scarce
pasture and water (Lewis 2008: 25).

This way of connecting towards a descent system exists in its most explicit form in
northern Somalia (now Somaliland), the area where Lewis did fieldwork amongst
nomadic pastoralists. Among the agricultural people in the Shabeelle and Jubba riverine
areas, however, genealogy is perceived differently as they base their political alliances
on living in the same place. And as Virginia Luling (2006: 473) points out, the ordinary
Somali is usually not aware of wider connections beyond the ancestor of his clan or
clan-family. Only some elders know how to trace the genealogy down to the two main
branches of the nation, Samaale and Sab and to their father Hiil.
From Clan to Clanism

The year he was born, Omar says, Somalia was also born as an independent nation-state. After years of division, the areas under British and Italian rule were unified and many Somalis enthusiastically greeted the foundation of a pan-Somali state. Omar’s main clan, the Darood, played an important role in the formation of the first political party, the Somali Youth League (SYL), in the struggle for independence and in the formation of Somalia’s first government.

Omar grew up with his father’s advice to first and foremost regard himself as a Somali. This view could be closely tied to his father’s social position as a wealthy and well-educated urban trader who embodied the ideas of nationalism and rejected the importance of the clan. Luling (2006: 475) writes about the urbanised and educated elite in Somalia who began to reject the system of clanship with the rise of Somali nationalism after the Second World War. Instead, they focussed on the ideal of national unity and an undifferentiated Somaliness, but she argues that this ideal never matched the reality of everyday life and clan affiliations never ceased to play a fundamental role in politics (Luling 2006: 475-476).

Siyaad Barre’s regime, which formed the political backdrop of Omar’s youth, explicitly buried clanship, although Barre himself made use of the system and began playing one clan against another. Omar tells of the sudden change in attitude the dictator began to show towards the Majerteen, regardless of their affiliation to the Darood. The prohibition of open references to clans, however, influenced the generation growing up under Barre. Being among a growing number of Somalis moving to Mogadishu and other towns, leading to a greater mix of people from different clans and sub-clans, Omar portrays himself as part of a generation that began to value education and move away from clan-thinking. Luling (2006: 476) describes it as “a generation of young urban people to many of whom clanship meant little, or who were committed to rejecting it”.

In Omar’s opening story, the clan takes on an ambiguous role: On the one side he sees the clan as the ordering principle for any form of social relation, which, as he shows in the case of the marriage of his parents, was not always exclusionary.12 On the other

12 Indeed, marriages in traditional Somali society were by rule exogamic. As Kapteijns (1995: 246-247) argues, intermarriage was an important instrument to create political harmony and mutual economic support between
side, Omar describes the breakdown of this positive and protective understanding of the clan into one ‘that creates fences between people’. In Omar’s story it is the rise of this form of clanism that leads to the demise of Somalia. His account mirrors a position in an ongoing debate between academics studying the roots of the war in Somalia. While Lewis’ reading of the role of kinship was so influential that it became a point of reference for almost anyone writing or thinking about Somalia, it was also the topic that divided Somali studies scholars. With the eruption of the civil war and the unprecedented forms of violence in the 1990s, the questioning of the anthropologist’s views grew louder. The critics were a new generation of Somali and Western scholars, whom Abdi I. Samatar called “transformationists”, as opposed to the “traditionalists”, namely Lewis and his followers (A. Samatar 1992).

Samatar argues that traditionalists such as I.M. Lewis or Bernhard Helander evade the qualitative nature of the changes in Somali society and that in doing so they have failed to systematically analyse changes that have happened over the last century. They create a picture of contemporary Somalis as egalitarian pastoral democrats by ignoring the massive changes that have taken place since Lewis’ most influential ethnography, A Pastoral Democracy, was first published in 1961 (A. Samatar 1992: 627). “Such static reading of social history makes the analysis of social change mechanical, linear, and simplistic”, Samatar (1992: 628) argues. “Consequently, people and the communities in which they live have little ability to innovate […] But the reality is often very different, because the inhabitants of any country are not dupes who carry the burden of history without having any capacity to alter the future course of human affairs.”

Transformationists such as Abdi I. Samatar, Ahmed I. Samatar, Lidwien Kapteijns and Catherine Besteman focus on the political, social and economical changes in modern Somalia and on the transformation of Somalia from clan based to class based. They argue that the introduction of a state apparatus during colonial times and the manipulations of post-colonial regimes during the Cold War have undermined the foundations of traditional Somali society. In an essay reflecting on Lewis’ legacy and on the different points of view the debate created, Markus Höhne and Virginia Luling (2010: 6) argue that the transformationists describe an emptying of the traditional different groups. Since the outbreak of the civil war, however, these dynamics have changed substantially, so that now many Somalis are expected to marry within their own clan (Gardner & Warsame 2004: 153-161).
system, whereby the clan became isolated and the largely destructive forces of ‘clanism’ in contemporary Somali identity politics came to the foreground.

An article by Catherine Besteman on the representation of the state collapse in Somalia and its connections to clanship in the US media, published in 1996, provoked another fierce debate between the two camps. Besteman attacked the clan-based explanation of warfare used by many journalists and policymakers. They had derived these explanations from anthropological accounts of northern Somali organisation of pastoral societies, which, as she argued, oversimplified the complex and dynamic hierarchies of different patterns such as race and class (Besteman 1996a: 120). Lewis disagreed with Besteman’s interpretation of the warfare in 1990s Somalia and wrote a critical response, provocatively titled ‘Doing Violence to Ethnography’ (Lewis 1996).

Lewis’ interpretation of the eruption of the civil war in Somalia follows a primordialist point of view. He argues that the violence experienced today mirrors the traditionally aggressive nature of Somali culture, while Besteman sees tradition as more fluid (Besteman 1996b). She contends that the violence and fragmentation in Somalia are better understood by looking at twentieth century transformations, and questions how it is possible for Lewis to disregard events such as colonialism, state building, the Cold War, international aid and the expanding global economy. She argues that while some aspects of the traditional kinship system have persisted, others have been transformed dramatically (Besteman 1996b: 110). Lewis, on the other hand, stresses that the conflict in Somalia today resembles what Somalis “have always done – only with greater access to more lethal weapons” (Lewis 1996: 101).

As Ken Menkhaus writes, this debate means that researchers cannot avoid taking a position on how to handle clanism. He suggests that instead of trying to resolve the controversial issue, scholars ought to look at the empirical and theoretical space that lies in between (Menkhaus 2010: 88). He agrees with transformationists in their claim that ethnic identity in Somalia is constructed and that clanism is not static but fluid. On the other side he also suggests that the years of political instability, warfare and ethnic cleansing have led to new political configurations that have “mobilised and hardened clan identity to an extent that one cannot conduct a serious analysis of Somali politics at
either the national or the local level without treating clanism as one of the main drivers of behaviour” (Menkhaus 2010: 89).

The stories Omar told me about Somalia in our first encounters support an understanding of Somalia’s disintegration as the interplay of different forces. Discussing the many changes his clan went through – from pre-colonial, to colonial, and post-colonial times – he illustrates the transformation of a place and all the social ties that make that place into what it is. He refuses the stereotypical picture of Somalia as the land where the courageous, egalitarian nomads rule and proposes another, less homogenous understanding of the past. And, as Omar emphasises throughout the beginning of his life story, his journey started in Somalia but it didn’t end there. While the place called Somalia that still preoccupies him helped moulding him into the person he has become, it was by leaving that place behind that he could encounter new places and be moulded by them.
2.

LIVING ONE-EYED

Making the Story Unfold

Sitting in his small office in Carlton, I had travelled with Omar from his hometown Gardo, through the changing city of Mogadishu to the moment he left the country – against his father’s will. Like any journey, this story-journey had not been characterised by stability but by changes and ruptures in the act of telling – movements that mirrored the changing relationship between Omar and me. Since our first meetings, when we still had to get to know each other and Omar’s stories seemed to be directed towards creating a common ground from where the telling of further stories could be made possible, we had now grown more comfortable with each other – and with the growing closeness, the pace of Omar’s storytelling had changed as well. While his initial accounts of Somalia were marked by the difficulty of narrating a place that had undergone such violent rupture, the storytelling was slowly beginning to sharpen its focus. This shift, however, didn’t magically happen, as I initially thought it would.

At the end of one of our encounters Omar invited me to come to the launch of a report he had written together with people from the Carlton Neighbourhood Centre about creating employment opportunities for men from Horn of Africa countries living in Melbourne. As I followed a group of Somali men into the venue, the Centre’s beautiful, old garden house, Omar spotted me. “Annika, you came!” he exclaimed, sounding almost surprised that I had really come. He introduced me to a group of older Somali men, joking that I was his friend who had come all the way from Austria to find out what Somalis in Melbourne were up to. As he showed me to my seat, Omar told me that he would have liked to introduce me to his eldest son who was supposed to be there for the presentation, but that he was obviously arriving in ‘Somali time’. A few minutes later, when people began taking their seats, a tall boy entered the room. His father didn’t need to introduce us – he looked like a younger version of Omar. “You’re Omar’s son, right?” I asked him as he sat down next to me. “Yes,” he replied, shyly.

In his talk Omar summarised some of his findings. He explained to the audience the many challenges Eritrean, Ethiopian, South Sudanese and Somali men faced when
settling in Melbourne. He pointed out that a high percentage of those who had been admitted to Australia on humanitarian grounds were highly educated, but that their university degrees weren’t accepted here. As a result, many former university professors and successful business men ended up as taxi drivers or factory workers, depressed about the lack of pathways into jobs befitting their skills and training. Omar said that those who could afford it often chose to re-migrate to countries such as the Arab Emirates, Kenya or Egypt, where they felt more valued. After his presentation, people were gathering around the buffet filled with injera-bread, fruit and Somali sweets. Omar was talking to the local politician who had launched the report. The Somali elders Omar had introduced me to were standing next to me, immersed in a lively debate. Omar’s son and a group of other teenage boys were sitting in the garden, giggling over things they were showing each other on their mobile phones. A man who introduced himself to me as Abdi, thanked an Ethiopian woman passing by for preparing the food. “Oh, that’s not my work,” she said, laughing. “You know me – I’m a bad house-wife!” Standing by the window, chatting to Abdi, the spring-sun warming us and looking out into the garden, where flowers and trees were in full bloom, I could see that the people who had come were appreciative of Omar’s work. There weren’t many people of his calibre in Melbourne, Abdi said, capable of communicating with both, his own and the wider community.

After a while, Omar joined us. We talked about his report, about how most employment policies for refugees in Victoria were aimed at integrating young people into the job market, whilst ignoring their parents’ generation. Omar told us how unemployed Somali men came to ask him for advice almost every day and how little opportunities there were for them. He said that he himself was experiencing all these difficulties firsthand. Although he had secured funding for his project, his position was very insecure and always dependent on the goodwill of those administering the public purse. The idea of setting up his own NGO to look into employment pathways was, in a way, a reaction to the fact that he had not been able to find a job that suited his educational background. It was as he had pointed out in one of his stories: Back in Puntland, he said, he wouldn’t have these struggles. There he wouldn’t be less than a minister.

As I was about to leave, Omar suggested to continue working on his life story the following week. He told me that he had read the transcripts of our first conversations
which I had emailed to him. Omar said that he was not happy about the way he was sometimes jumping from one stage of his life to another. He asked me not to use the stories that were marked by this jumpiness for the thesis. We agreed that I wouldn’t use these stories as verbatim texts. “How could we solve this problem with the jumpiness?” I asked him. “I think the structure of my past history may need more sharpening,” Omar said, explaining that upon reading the transcripts he felt that the stories he told me needed editorial work so that they also worked as texts. From then on he would read over all the transcripts and suggest changes, parts that didn’t work well, or ask me to rephrase. When we met again a week later, he also proposed that I take on a more directive role. “Maybe it would be wise if you put the question in a different format so that I can stay in a particular time of my life and then move on from there,” he said.

So instead of just letting the story happen, I was now actively involved in making the story happen. From then on, our meetings would begin with my asking Omar to tell me about a specific time in his life. Although I sometimes interrupted to ask him to elaborate some aspects, or commented on things that interested, moved, or amused me, it seems that by reading the first transcripts Omar himself had become much more conscious about his voice as a storyteller. As a result, the leaps back and forth disappeared and my direction was no longer necessary. The disjointedness within the storytelling disappeared it seems, by finding a common ground, by sharing the responsibility over what was told and how. As part of this process we got to know each other, our interests and motivations better. By reading and discussing the transcripts, we began to understand the different natures of spoken and written stories. We came to agree on the aesthetic parameters that should guide the retelling of his stories in my thesis. As part of this process we also got to understand our limitations and the unspoken thresholds within the storytelling setting that could not be crossed.

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I left Somalia in 1983 and went to Saudi Arabia. In my view at that time there were many connections between Somalia and the Arab world. But when I got there it was different. I was seen as an African, I was seen to be black, and I was only allowed to legally stay in the country if I found a job. The system of
employment was very, very poor. You had to aggressively go out and find the job yourself. I knew a few people in Saudi Arabia, but when it came to jobs they couldn’t do much for me. So I had to do all I could to find employment.

The culture that I had grown up in and the culture that I started to experience in Saudi Arabia were different. The thing that really bothered me the most at that time was that if, for example, you visited a friend and that friend got into trouble and the police came to his house, they not only arrested the person that they considered to be their target but all the people who were there as well, and you were likely to be deported back to the country where you came from.

So the migrants were always living in fear. You could not talk to a lady who was not either your mother or your sister. And that was another problem because we Somalis came from a more liberal life and there were so many girls living in Saudi Arabia. So you sometimes had to ignore a woman walking by whom you knew, purely because you didn’t want to be caught by the police. Or you had to wait until you could go somewhere where you could talk or even just say hello. So that kind of culture was there. The people there lived under the authority of a strong monarch. The king decided about anything and everything and all the people were expected to be loyal and behave well towards the royal family.

I lived in Saudi Arabia for four years. For the first year and a half I was trying to find a job. My plan was to get work there and to then either come back to Somalia to start some kind of business or to go somewhere in Europe. It seems that the latter option became more viable because Somalia was getting worse year after year.

I always wanted to learn, because when I was leaving the country the first thing my father liked me to do was to study. My father was so determined to educate us because he believed that our life and our success depended on our education. And he was really, really upset that I was leaving and he strongly believed that it would not be easier for me to go overseas to study there because he knew how hard it was to survive in another country. I promised him that I would make sure that I studied and that I would make sure that I achieved something. As a result, I did my best to finish my education. Here in Australia I
did my BA in International Studies and a Masters in International Development. That had so much to do with what I said to my father and the expectation of my father.

I found a job and began working for a hospital. Sometimes we used to get a patient from the royal family and the whole staff, particularly the Saudis and some Arabs, were becoming hysterical because they were having a patient from the royal family. It was shocking to me! Why this? Why does this bother you? The problem was that if I was seen by the Saudis to not be supportive then I was in trouble. And I was a different person: Young, very energetic, someone who came from a liberal society who didn’t care about all this. There were times when I was worried that what I was doing wasn’t right.

I remember, one day we had a son of the current king – at that time he was Crown Prince. And someone came to me and said to me: “Do you know this young boy?” I said: “No.” And he said: “He is better than you.” And I said: “Why?” And he said: “Because he is the son of the crown prince.” And I said: “Hang on, he is not better than me, he might be better than you, but I don’t care about what he is.” That guy, he was in shock, hearing someone saying these kinds of things. He didn’t come to work for almost five days, worrying that he might be arrested as a result of the interaction between him and me. He was absolutely in shock.

There was a large Somali community of expatriates in Saudi Arabia, so I was associating with them more or less. There were Saudi colleagues I was working with but the interaction between the Saudis and me was limited, and I think it was coming from their side. I could be wrong but I think in Saudi Arabia for Saudis to interact with foreigners in their free time was not encouraged. They didn’t want them to be exposed to other cultures, to hear other views. You know, someone like me who was anti-monarchy or didn’t bother who they were. So the kind of relationship that we had was more job-focused than social.

Initially I was shocked by this treatment but later on I got used to it. I mean, it was common and you always accept what is common. What you can’t accept or what you question is what is directed to you personally and not to others. So
when I see that everybody is the same, I accept it. A Somali proverb says: “Haddaad tagto meel il laga la’yahay ilbaa la iska ridaa”. Translated it says: “If you go into a society where they have only one eye, then you have to keep one of your eyes covered as well.” The issue is not the eye per se; it is that if they see the thing from a certain angle you have to go with the flow. Otherwise you will be wrong as all the others see the thing through one eye, not two eyes. So I used this proverb as a basis of me adapting to that life. It was the right time to use that proverb.

I think for many, many Somalis, Saudi Arabia was a springboard that they could use to jump to another place. So you just went there and earned money so that you could buy your ticket and then leave as soon as possible.

I couldn’t see a future in Saudi Arabia and I couldn’t see a future in Somalia, so I decided to go somewhere else. I remember when I was in Saudi Arabia, in the last contract that I signed there was a clause that said: “We will terminate your contract whenever someone who can replace you and who is Saudi is there.” At that time they were having what they called a Saudization program, whereby the migrants had to give way to the Saudis. So every morning when I went to work I had to check the board to see whether I had been terminated or not. That was shocking, that means an uncertainty, you don’t know your fate, you don’t know what will happen to you tomorrow.

What really made me leave was to be ahead a little bit, so I terminated them before they terminated me. That’s what I did. I first secured my visa to go to India and then I said “Good luck!” and left. I didn’t want them to say to me “you have to leave”, because if they told me I had to leave I would have had to go back to Somalia. And that’s what I was trying to avoid.

I wanted to go to India for two reasons: One, I could get their visa, and two, the money that I had collected was enough to pay for my education there. Coming from Saudi Arabia, India was a totally different issue. The life there, especially in my time in 1988, was very rough, the poverty was high, people were living in the streets. Actually you could find people who lived under a balcony! They were
born there, they grew up there and probably they will die there. The mother conceived the child under that balcony! The poverty was enormous.

I was coming from Saudi Arabia, which was rich, shiny, clean, the latest cars, the latest high-tech, anything you can imagine, it was just clean and glowing. And to then come to India was shocking to me, more shocking than when I was in Saudi Arabia. So I decided to go somewhere else and I managed to get a visa to go to New Zealand. Actually, I first applied for an Australian visa, but it was denied because I was honest with them and confessed that my brother was there and had applied to become a refugee so they concluded that I would also apply for refugee status there. So they said: “Sorry, we cannot give it to you.”

I stayed in India only for one month and a half. Then I decided to just try my luck and see New Zealand and see whether I could live there or not.

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The Pirate-View on the World

When I was seven and in my first year at school in Eindhoven in the Netherlands, there was a boy in my class whose name was Hansje but whom I secretly called the pirate, because he wore an eye patch. The teacher explained to us that he had a lazy eye, and that the doctors had decided to keep the well-functioning eye covered for a while so that the other one could catch up. I was fascinated by this boy’s condition. When we were out in the playground I was staring at him, trying to figure out how he was able to see things with only one lazy eye. Would he be able to play soccer without missing the ball? Would he be able to run without falling over? Discovering no obvious signs of difference, I closed one of my eyes, determined to find out what the world looked like for a one-eyed person.

I soon realised that covering up one eye didn’t produce a remarkably different experience of the world. I now know that Hansje, the pirate, would have seen everything around him perfectly clear, but that he would not have been able to perceive distance and speed, and that he therefore would not have experienced space three-dimensionally.
Omar’s story awakened long-forgotten memories of Hansje and his pirate-view onto the world. After leaving Omar’s office and the storytelling setting, they kept following me – even in my dreams. My memories of Hansje, the ‘pirate’, I realised, stood for more than my childhood experiments with seeing the world through one eye. Hansje also embodied my earliest and perhaps most deep-seated encounter with displacement. He was what parents and teachers called a ‘difficult’ child: He was wild, loud and rough. In fits of rage he destroyed whatever he could get his hands on – usually toys that he threw against the wall, pens that he broke and books that he tore into pieces. Most children – and, even more so, their parents – avoided him. He was hardly ever invited to birthday parties or sleepovers. Despite all this, Hansje became my best friend at school. I came to learn that he was loud and angry, but that he would never turn this anger against others. I also came to understand the reasons behind his anger: Hansje’s parents had neglected him to such a degree that two years earlier welfare officers had put him in a children’s home. From there a family with three children, keen to give a disadvantaged child a chance, had taken him into foster care. I still remember the moment when he told me that his parents and siblings, the people I had met so many times, were not his real parents. His real parents, he said, couldn’t look after him. I still recollect talking to my mother about it. She told me that Hansje was sad and angry, but that his new family was trying to create a place for him to feel at home again.

One day, Hansje stopped coming to school. My mother told me that his foster parents had been overwhelmed by his outbursts of anger, that they didn’t know how to deal with the amount of aggression he showed. As a result, they had decided to return him to the children’s home. I remember the anger and helplessness I felt over the way my sad, angry friend was pushed around from one place to another. I was angry about the way the people who had invited him into their house to make him feel at home, had taken that very home away from him again. I felt helpless, thinking about his life in the children’s home, and how I couldn’t do anything to change the situation. And I thought that now Hansje’s anger would only grow bigger. Although I have never seen Hansje again, these feelings of anger and helplessness over his displacements have never left me. While Hansje’s and Omar’s stories are obviously dissimilar, there was something in Omar’s telling that provoked me to leave these differences aside and think about the underlying existential theme of how humans experience displacement.
Omar’s one-eyed look onto the world surrounding him in Saudi Arabia protected him from the hopelessness and rage Hansje felt over the impossibility of emplacement. Omar made a conscious decision to live one-eyed. In an exclusionary society where he felt that he didn’t belong he took an old Somali proverb as guidance. As he never felt that Saudi Arabia was where he wanted to stay, he was working his way out, towards ‘somewhere else’. In the meanwhile, however, he decided that keeping himself from getting socially involved, from experiencing the place in all its dimensions, was the best way of weathering the storm. Experiencing the world one-eyed was a strategy, a way of dealing with a place that marked him as an outsider. Omar’s experiences in Saudi Arabia as an outsider and sharp onlooker, albeit with one eye, reminded me of someone retreating into his shell.

In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard (1994: 105-135) writes about the ambiguous position the shell has come to take up in the human imagination. He suggests that empty shells, similar to empty nests, invite us to daydream about refuge. Yet hiding in a shell is not a passive act. As Bachelard (1994: 111) explains, someone who is hiding in a shell is always preparing a way out. By staying motionless in the shell, the hiding creature is preparing “temporal explosions”, or “whirlwinds of being”. He stresses that the most dynamic escapes take place in cases of repressed beings, for by going inwards and postponing their action, they carry in them the potential for a type of action that is the most decisive of all (Bachelard 1994: 112). In a similar way, Omar’s one-eyed look onto the world wasn’t a passive retreat. In deciding to go with the flow and to keep himself from experiencing the world around him in all its dimensions, Omar was only preparing his way out and away from a repressive environment. While Saudi Arabia was the springboard he needed to leave Somalia, it didn’t provide the security and social features necessary for making it a home. During this time, it wasn’t in place but in the realms of his inner self that he found security and protection. Rather than dwelling in place, Omar retreated and became a self-dweller. Where Hansje, in his helplessness over the way the world denied him a place to feel safe and at home, turned outwards in the form of anger, Omar turned inwards, not letting the harshness of the surrounding world enter his inner world. While such a turn inwards doesn’t, of course, exclude the possibility of directing any anger he might have experienced merely at himself, in his stories about Saudi Arabia Omar stories himself as a calm, distanced onlooker.
Given that the one-eyed look at the world deprives us of spatial three-dimensionality, the absence of a clear sense of place in Omar’s account perhaps shouldn’t come as a surprise. Omar speaks about the four years he spent in Saudi Arabia, excluded as ‘other’, as ‘black’, as ‘African’. He also talks about the little victories he celebrated within the limits of an oppressive and absolutist system where every word could be turned against oneself. But while he pictures his everyday life and the limited interactions with Saudis, it doesn’t become clear where all these stories take place. The ‘Middle East’, ‘India’, ‘Saudi Arabia’ – the words Omar uses to locate his story – are geographical descriptors, but all they convey are the impression of a vast space somewhere else. This isn’t to suggest that his story is placeless, but while Omar’s story is clearly taking place, within the settings of that story there is no place for him to be or become a part of. With the impossibility of becoming part of a larger whole, of walking, talking, seeing and hearing the place in togetherness with others, the place refuses to be known by him in all its experiential dimensions. In short: while Omar’s story takes place, this place refuses his emplacement.

Let me, for a moment, go back to the first of Omar’s opening stories: “I was born in Puntland in Somalia”, he tells us there. In the next sentence he specifies: “Particularly I was born in the Northeast of Somalia, in a town called Gardo”. Omar then explains that Gardo was mainly inhabited by a specific group of people, the Majerteen. So we come to understand the geographical location of the country, the area and the town where he was born. But we also begin to grasp that the social unit organising the place is the clan. Thus, within a few sentences Omar has placed himself and his story, leaving us without any doubt about his being-part-of this specific place. As mentioned above, in all its political, social and historical specifications, the first part of Omar’s story can be read as a way of positioning himself and the place he came from, as an emplacement of himself and his story in the world.

Omar’s storying of his time in Saudi Arabia and India doesn’t provide this specificity and meaningfulness of emplacement. The few locations he mentions – the nameless hospital in Saudi Arabia where he works, the tiny balcony within the immense largeness of poverty-struck India, where a baby was born, or the somewhere he is working towards – could be anywhere. While it didn’t strike me as important during the telling and I didn’t ask for more details, the lack of place, both for Omar to become a part of
and for the story he told, began to preoccupy me. What then, I asked myself, constitutes the *hereness* of a place?

**From the Enclosed World to the Infinite Universe**

In ancient philosophy, place was seen as essential to human existence. In the *Physics*, Aristotle (2007: 60) wrote that “everything is somewhere and in place”. Following on from Archytas’ treatise on place, he concluded that because no things are without place, and yet place itself doesn’t stop to exist when the things in it disappear, place takes precedence over all other things. Place, then, is where a thing is. But place goes beyond the mere function of locating, it is also something surrounding, and it is co-extensive with what it contains. The inner and the outer surface of the things contained are dependent upon each other, or, as Aristotle formulates it: “the limits are together with what is limited” (quoted in Casey 1997b: 273).

Until the Renaissance, philosophers followed the Aristotelian axiom that ‘to be is to be in place’ and that hence ‘to be without place is not to be’. In the seventeenth century, this was replaced by a new axiom, ‘to be is to be in *space*’, when space took on the meaning of “something nonlocal and nonparticular, something having little to do with close containment and everything to do with an outright infinity” (Casey 1997b: 275). Alexandre Koyré described this radical transformation of thought from place to space as one “from the closed world to the infinite universe” (Koyré 1979). Key thinkers on space, such as Johannes Kepler, Isaac Newton, René Descartes and Gottfried Leibniz, developed a new conception of the universe and humans’ place within it, which eventually led to the replacement of the Aristotelian conception of space as a differentiated set of innerworldly places, by a geometrisation of space. Space came to be seen as an infinite and homogenous extension, as something that is only unified by the identity of its ultimate and basic components and laws (Koyré 1979: viii), and place was dissolved into space as the dominant term of Eurocentric discourse (Casey 1997b: 288). This shift from place to space – which has gone largely unrecognised within anthropological theory – has influenced debates on space, movement and displacement to such a large degree that it defines the settings of much of what is at stake within this thesis.
In modern and postmodern thinking, time and space have come to take such dominant positions that there seems to be no room left for place. Paradoxically, the inflationary use of locational vocabulary in contemporary scholarly writing could suggest the opposite: terms such as ‘position’, ‘location’, ‘mapping’, ‘centre / margin’, ‘inside-outside’, ‘displacement’, ‘liminal space’, ‘third space’, ‘threshold’, ‘interstices’ and so on, have become the staple of academic writing in the humanities and social sciences. As Michael Keith and Steve Pile (1993: 1) argue in the introduction to their landmark collection of essays, *Place and the Politics of Identity*, these terms are commonly used to refer to complexity but are hardly ever directly explored or confronted.

“We are forever hearing about the space of this and/or the space of that”, Henri Lefebvre (1991: 3) laments within the same vein, “about literary space, ideological spaces, the space of the dream, psychoanalytic topologies, and so on and so forth”. He criticises the fact that important contemporary philosophers (and here he is specifically targeting Foucault) often speak about space without ever explaining what space they are actually referring to. Although Lefebvre was, again, more concerned with space than with place, I consider his book, *The Production of Space*, to be one of the key attempts to rethink space. In doing so, he implicitly also helped to gain a new understanding of place. Lefebvre regarded the lived experiences of geographical space as fundamentally social, and positioned himself against mainstream thinkers who considered space as something given. Inspired by this turn towards the *production* of space, a new generation of Marxist human geographers questioned geography’s role as a hegemonic positivist “spatial science” (Massey 1992: 69). They argued that space is always produced and reproduced, and that space is the outcome of social and political struggle (Harvey 1973, 1989, 2000; Massey 1984, 1993, 1994, 2005; Soja 1989, 1996, 2000). The radical reconceptualization of space by this generation of human geographers eventually inspired anthropologists such as Margaret Rodman, Liisa Malkki, Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson to rethink the discipline’s problematic relationship to place during the 1990s, a move I have discussed in more detail in the introduction.

While many thinkers champion space in an era we have reluctantly come to call postmodernity, place appears to be the neglected stepsister, made to hide behind space and time. While space and time promise change and movement, place has come to stand for stagnation and boredom. Michel De Certeau’s opposition between space and place
can be read as paradigmatic for the way place has come to be connected with immobility. He sees place as determined by objects that are reducible to “the being-there of something dead”, taking on the appearance of a tomb. Space, on the other side, is determined by operations, which specify spaces by the actions of historical subjects (De Certeau 1984: 118); for De Certeau movement is always the condition for the production of space, while place is immovable, or just there.

**Beings of the Between**

The shift from place to space raises the question of where this leaves the human subject. Have we, with the beginning of modernity, become placeless beings? Is Omar, in his stories of the time he spent on the move, lost in the ever-expanding vastness of the universe? Have we exchanged the restricting hereness of place for the somewhereness of space? Edward Casey has suggested otherwise. In *Getting Back into Place*, he argues that we humans are so place-oriented that sheer placelessness is incomprehensible. The Greek word *atopos* – literally: ‘no place’ – also means ‘bizarre’ or ‘strange’ (Casey 1993: x).

While striving for a place to dwell, humans are at the same time amongst the most mobile animals. “We are beings of the between”, Casey (1993: xii) writes, “always on the move between places.” But despite the mobile character of human life, Casey (1993: xiii) argues that “where we are – the place we occupy however briefly – has everything to do with what and who we are (and finally, that we are)”. For Casey, place and body are inescapably linked. Modern Western philosophy, however, has rarely discussed the role of the body in the determination of place (Casey 1993: 45). Given the predominance of space and time in modern philosophy, this development is not surprising for Casey because the more we consider space as unlimited, the less we will be concerned with the position of the human body within its vastness. Casey (1993: 46) suggests that the importance of place and its distinctiveness to space can be understood only by giving explicit attention to the lived body in relation to its whereabouts. According to Casey, knowledge of place begins with the “bodily experience of being-in-place”. At once an agent and a vehicle, our body continually takes us into place. Without our bodies we would be disoriented and confused and there wouldn’t be a lived
or sensed place. Indeed our bodies help us to structure and configure entire scenarios of place (Casey 1993: 48).

It is by my lived body that I am here. The body becomes the bearer of the here, or its Träger, as Husserl called it. Husserl (1981: 250) described the hereness of the body as the “absolute here”, meaning that it cannot be diminished or compromised. “I cannot become not here and remain (myself)”, Casey (1993: 52) writes. “Part of the absoluteness of the here is that I cannot detach it from my body-self and thus from the place to which this body-self now gives access.” While Omar's story suggests the inescapability of bodily hereness, it also suggests that sometimes, people make use of other faculties in order to circumvent the absoluteness of the here. His decision of retreating to a one-eyed look onto the world indicates that memory, storytelling and imagination can work as means of actively changing (or perhaps even manipulating) our bodily experience of place.

While I agree with Casey that it is through our bodies that we are always in place, I also agree with Sally Ward, who has suggested that imagination and memory need to be regarded as essential to people’s experience of place, too (Ward 2003: 84). Casey doesn’t neglect the importance of the imagination or memory,13 but he portrays them as secondary to the body, which he sees as the primary site of place-experience. He thereby overlooks the powerful ways in which the imaginary can also form and transform the way we experience our being-here. I suggest that while the lived body carries us into a here, this very body cannot be separated from the thoughts, hopes and imaginations that propel its movements between places.

Omar, who begins his life story by placing himself, does so by referring to explicit spatial functions that determine his bodily position (or the hereness). He tells us that the Majerteen who constituted the place where he grew up were literally on the right side, in front, behind and on the left side of himself. He creates the impression that he was surrounded or enclosed by the people who, together with him, determined and inhabited the place called Gardo. Yi-Fu Tuan (2001: 12) argues that kinesthesia, sight and touch are the sensory organs that enable humans’ strong feeling for space and spatial qualities.

13 In his earlier work, Casey focussed on the phenomenological study of memory and the imagination (Casey 1976, 1987). While in the foreword to Getting Back into Place Casey (1993: xvi) stresses that imagination, memory and place are complementary in character, the book mainly looks at our embodied experience of place.
“Movements such as the simple ability to kick one’s legs and stretch one’s arms are basic to the awareness of space. Space is experienced directly as having room in which to move.” Again, in Omar’s case, this room in which to move can be read in terms of the immediate and lived bodily experience (or Erlebnis) of being-in-place in Gardo. But it can also be understood in a wider sense as creating imaginary social room in which he could move about with ease and make sense of the place by walking and talking it in togetherness with others (Erfahrung).

While space is perceived bodily, movement and travelling between different places gives humans a feeling for direction. Forward, backward and sideways are experienced differently. To understand or ‘live’ space and place, experience is required. This experience relates to both, lived and reflected experiences. As Tuan (2001: 12) remarks, it takes the infant, or a blind person whose sight has been restored, time to perceive the world as “made up of stable three-dimensional objects arranged in space rather than as shifting patterns and colours”. He notes that while we experience space and place with our bodies, space is transformed into place “as it acquires definition and meaning” (Tuan 2001: 136). Isn’t it exactly the lack of definition and meaning that explains the sense of placelessness marking Omar’s story?

If space is transformed into place by acquiring definition and meaning, then Omar’s story clearly indicates that this meaning can only be written, spoken or performed into a place together. Or, as Casey (1993: 23) puts it: “The power a place such as a mere room possesses determines not only where I am in the limited sense of cartographic location but how I am together with others […] and even who we shall become together.” Places are thus made meaningful by the presence of others. As Tuan adds, and as Omar shows in his story, these places can also quickly lose their meaning if there are no people to share this experience with (Tuan 2001: 140).

Thinking about Hansje’s displacements and his (and my own) anger over it, I came to see that Omar’s decision to temporarily retreat to a one-eyed look onto the world shouldn’t be understood as a ‘lack of’, for he used it as a tool to deal with a disempowering situation. While he might have been forced to live one-eyed, the other eye, the covered one, surely wasn’t lazy. Perhaps the closed eye took on the role of the inward-looking-eye which enabled him to see the things that were surrounding him
critically but to keep his thoughts and expressions about them inside the boundaries of his self. Commenting on the meaning of seeing and visibility in human life, John Berger (1984: 50-51) stresses that the ability of seeing the world around us with our outwards looking eyes is matched by the development of an inward looking “inner eye”. He writes that the first faculty accredited to the most important gods was that of sight. Yet, while the experience of seeing includes humans, it also excludes them, because they do not have an all-seeing eye and because they continuously face disappearances. As a result, people develop an inner eye that keeps the visible inside the boundaries of the self and retains, assembles and arranges it according to their own means: “With his inner eye man experiences the space of his own imagination and reflection. Normally it is within the protection of this inner space that he places, retains, cultivates, lets run wild or constructs Meaning.” (Berger 1984: 51)

Omar’s experience of living one-eyed can be read exactly within the realms of such an inner eye that orders, reflects and creates meaning. Deprived of becoming a meaningful part of the place he was living in, he closed himself off from experiencing it in all its dimensions. Letting the place and its habits become part of his being-here would have meant to also let its harshness and remorselessness enter his inner self. At the same time, living one-eyed didn’t mean that he was living in a placeless void. Rather it was the place itself that forced him to retreat and keep everything he saw, heard and felt locked up inside himself. Living one-eyed shielded him from the risk of getting lost in these painful dynamics. While it allowed him to see the place, it also allowed him to take what he had seen inwards in order to assemble, arrange and retain – and in doing so to make sense of his surroundings on his own terms.

Thinking Omar’s story with Hansje’s in the back of my mind opened a door for me to understand the dynamics of place that can make emplacement difficult or indeed impossible. Omar’s metaphor of living one-eyed allows us to begin to grasp the complexity of place: the struggles over power and resistance that play into its production; the social and intimate forces that mould it into something like home; and the movement that keeps us always between the here and the there. All these themes can be read into Omar’s account of living one-eyed – themes that surface in many of Omar’s stories and that are further discussed below.
3.

AN ACCIDENTAL MOVE

Dundeeing Australia

Before I left Vienna to move to Melbourne, I imagined Australia as a postcard depicting the deep redness of the Uluru rock formation against a sharp blue sky, kangaroos and wallabies, crocodiles and dangerous snakes hidden in rivers and swamps, and the unimaginably wide expanse of the Sandy Desert. I didn’t have very clear images of Australia’s inhabitants. Perhaps half because of my background as an anthropologist and half influenced by films I had watched during my childhood, myblurry imaginary Australian was almost more Aboriginal than anything else. These films I grew up with were bad so-called ethnographic documentaries that showed indigenous people from around the world – like animals, edited to amaze and to be gazed at, pitied or laughed at by Western couch potatoes.

Later, as a student of social anthropology, I understood the stories and images these films created in another, more critical way. Then, I saw these films more as a reflection of the sadness of a self-obsessed and yet lonely Western world, than a portrait of ‘lost tribes’ on the other side of the world. But these images still lay in my unconsciousness, for while I had some (albeit stereotypical) ideas about its indigenous inhabitants, I had no picture of ‘white’ Australia that went beyond a vague image of someone with a surfboard somewhere on a beach.

Omar’s image of Australia had been similarly stereotypical. “Back in Somalia I didn’t know anything about Australia at all,” he told me once over tea and biscuits. He explained that mainly because of the distance and because Australia had no presence in Africa at that time, very few people knew about it. At some point in the 1980s however, with the release of a popular movie, images of Australia suddenly began to take shape in Omar’s consciousness. “I started to know more about Australia when I watched Crocodile Dundee,” Omar said. “But it gave me the wrong impression.”

The source of his imaginary Australia was the hugely successful 1986 Australian comedy, Crocodile Dundee. The film’s plot revolves around Mick ‘Crocodile’ Dundee,
an Australian crocodile hunter who lives in the outback in a place called Walkabout Creek. Mick, who has never been to a city, and has never been exposed to features of modern life, accepts the invitation of an American journalist, Sue, to visit New York. The film accentuates the comicality of his perplexed reactions to modern life and the way he uses his archaic outback knowledge to survive in the urban jungle of super-modern New York and finally to win Sue’s heart.

“In the movie you watch someone who is struggling to live, someone who cannot adapt to American life, who cannot even understand or answer the phone,” Omar explained to me. “So it gave me the sense that Australia was a more backward society.” I had to laugh at the irony of the reversed images of Australians we both had in our minds before we moved here: influenced by television documentaries, my imaginary Australian was indigenous and removed from the modern way of life; influenced by a similar source Omar’s imaginary Australian was also backward and removed from the rest of the world – but white.14

Omar even told me that it took him a long time to convince his friends who had stayed behind that he wasn’t living a Crocodile Dundee-lifestyle here in Australia: “I remember when I came here I sent a few postcards back to friends in Saudi Arabia and India, and they couldn’t believe it. They said: ‘You’re lying to us!’ And I had to actually struggle to convince them that Australia was more modern than Saudi Arabia. They didn’t believe me!”

In our own ways, we both had ‘Crocodile Dundeed’ our imaginary Australia, and for neither of us these first images had endured against the reality we found. Omar was surprised to see how diverse and multicultural Australia was. He was even more surprised, he told me, to find that he felt much more comfortable living in Melbourne than in Saudi Arabia, although he had always believed the latter to be much closer to his own religious and cultural background as a Somali. I, too, was surprised by the multicultural make-up of Australia and by the diversity of the indigenous population.

14 For Omar, Crocodile Dundee’s story was interesting because it is about a white person taking on features that are otherwise attributed by white people to ‘others’. This ‘whiteness’, however, is ambiguous, as Dundee’s character draws on stereotypes about Aboriginal Australians. He takes on a role similar to Tarzan in the African context: while he is white, everything about him, the way he speaks, walks and interacts with the world, embodies stereotypical images of a ‘primitiveness’ that clashes with modernity. The film ends with Dundee proposing to ‘go walkabout’ — another reference to Aboriginal culture.
That Omar came to Australia at all, however, and not to New Zealand, where he was planning to go, was, as he put it, “an accident”.

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I actually never went to New Zealand, because I broke my journey at Sydney airport. I didn’t even visit New Zealand once. Maybe someday, Insha’Allah, I could go there and say: “Look, this is the country where I was planning to go.”

That I came to Australia was accidental, and I tell you how it happened: When I was booking my flight from India to New Zealand the travel agency failed to find a route that could take me directly to New Zealand. Either I had to go through Thailand, or I had to go through Indonesia, or I had to go through Singapore and stay there for one or two days – and I did not want that. The more I had to break my journey the more money I would have had to spend and I didn’t want to waste the money that I had initially set aside for studying. So I said that I wanted the minimum stopover time. The travel agency said “Fine, we will get you a flight that will take you from Bombay to Singapore, and from Singapore to Sydney. You will stay in Sydney for twelve hours and then early the next day you will be able to catch a plane from Sydney to Auckland.” And I said: “Fine!”

When I arrived at Sydney airport I was really tired and I tried to find somewhere to lie down because I hadn’t slept all the way from Bombay to Sydney. So I asked the staff at the airport to give me somewhere to sleep for a couple of hours until my flight was coming in. She said: “Why don’t you go to Sydney and sleep there and come back?” And I said: “I don’t have a visa.” And she said, “Hang on, I will talk to that gentleman to give it to you.” She called him and said: “Can you give him a visa? He would like to stay in Sydney for a couple of hours and sleep and come back.”

I went to him and gave him the passport, he filled in the form, and when he handed the passport back to me he saw that it was a Somali passport. Maybe he initially thought that I was Indian. And he said: “Can I have the passport back?” And I handed over the passport to him. I understood that something
suspicious was going on. He said: “Are you Somali?” I said: “Yes I am.” – “Hmmm. Where are you going?” I said: “I’m going to New Zealand.” – “To do what?” And I lied to him, I said: “Look, I’m studying in India, there are particular plants that are not available in India because I am doing agriculture, and I wanted to go to New Zealand to do more exploration on that particular kind of trees.” And he shook the passport like this, he looked into my eyes and said: “Have a nice trip!” It seemed that he understood or at least he was suspicious that I was actually lying to him but he gave me what they call ‘the benefit of the doubt’. He said: “Good luck!” Then I left the airport, I went to the city and called my brother. And I said: “Look, I’m in Sydney.” And he said: “Just wait for me.” He joined me in Sydney and we took a flight from Sydney to Melbourne in the night time instead of going to Auckland. And I’m still here.

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Spatial Tactics

When Omar told me about the chain of events that led to his move to Australia we laughed a lot. We laughed at the comicality of the remarkable coincidences, which, as if scripted, decided his future in just a few minutes. We laughed at the flash of wit that allowed Omar to quickly assess his possibilities and come up with a story that convinced the suspicious immigration officer. We laughed at the fact that he has never been to the place where he was intending to go to first – not even for a holiday. We laughed at the “I’m still here” with which he ends his migration story; here despite the odds that seemed to be against him, and here instead of there in New Zealand or wherever luck would have taken him.

My own arrival in Australia in 2009 couldn’t have been more different. Before I arrived I had received my student visa, a mere formality that involved filling in an application form online. I arrived with a three-year scholarship to write my PhD, financed with money from an Australian institution. I felt nervous about moving to the other side of the world, but at the same time I also felt excited because I knew that I wasn’t going to be lonely. Although I didn’t have any close friends or family members in Australia, I arrived knowing that there were colleagues who were awaiting me.
After all the excitement of months of organising and preparing myself for my departure, with all my beloved books packed in boxes, my furniture sold, my apartment empty, the goodbye party with friends celebrated, I vividly remember the sudden feeling of sadness that overcame me when I hugged my elder sister Eva goodbye. I was struck by the realisation of what it meant to go so far away from the people who knew me by heart and whom I knew by heart. I suddenly realised that we wouldn’t be able to reach as close into each other’s lives from such a great distance. “Are we going to become strangers to each other?” I thought, fighting tears that were running down my cheeks as I walked towards the departure gate. But the closer the plane came to my destination, the more this feeling of utter sadness turned into one of excitement. For in a place on the other side of the world where I didn’t have any social ties, I felt that I would be free to become in ways I hadn’t been before. With this feeling of excitement, I landed at Melbourne’s Tullamarine Airport. When I handed my passport to the immigration officer, a quick glance at my country of origin and the visa was enough to wave me through. I can’t even remember him looking into my eyes.

How many other people were denied entry the very same day? My mind went back to a Somali man I had met while I was waiting for my connecting flight at Dubai airport. When I was restlessly walking around in the strange, almost worldless universe of shops, never-ending daytime and endless passageways, trying to find a place to sit down, he offered me a chair next to him. It was then that he told me that he had been wandering around the ever-busy airport for weeks, having lost any feeling for space and time. His hopes of escaping the bitter life in a refugee camp in Kenya and migrating to Malaysia on a student visa were shattered in Dubai, where the authorities did not allow him to board the plane. Because there was no place to send him back to, the Emirates officers simply kept him on hold within the airport, neither allowing him to go out nor in. After my plane to Melbourne took off, I realised that I didn’t even know his name, but I often think about him and wonder what happened to him, this nameless man caught in a placeless universe.

Marc Augé defines the airport as one of the most outstanding examples of the non-places that the dynamics of supermodernity produced. While “anthropological place” is formed by individual identities, local references and unspoken know-how about living in a specific place, a non-place at the most shares the identity of passengers, customers
or other drivers (Augé 1995: 101). From the non-place the international airport in Omar’s story represents, we can begin to anticipate the role of the state in the struggle over the places that make up the imagined community of a nation (Anderson 1983). Places are not only felt on an intimate level, but also highly contested constructions. Omar’s assurance that he is “still here” cheekily points towards the interplay of political inscriptions of space that determines who is allowed in and who is supposed to stay out. At the same time it also hints at his capacity to outwit and subvert these spatial power dynamics. Setha Low and Denise Lawrence-Zúñiga (2003: 30) describe this use of space as a strategy and technique of power or social control as “spatial tactics”.

How deeply the ordering grip of the state can reach into our everyday lives has been famously demonstrated in Michel Foucault’s work. In focusing on spatial arrangements he showed the role of architecture as a political technology to create a “docile body” through the omniscient “panoptic view” (Foucault 1975). When, in his 1967 Berlin lectures, Foucault suggested that the “anxiety of our era has to do fundamentally with space, no doubt a great deal more than with time”, he hinted at the neglected importance of spatial tactics (Foucault 1986: 23). His emphasis on the power relations that delineate specific ‘sites’ (not to be confused with ‘places’) no doubt played a crucial role in the regenerated interest in space I mentioned earlier. But Foucault’s use of ‘space’ and ‘sites’ remained vague and undefined, relying on a taken-for-granted understanding of the two categories without questioning their meanings (on this matter see: Lefebvre 1991: 3-4; Massey 1992: 1; Casey 1997a: 300; Malpas 1999: 19). His work could nevertheless offer an entry point for a new look onto the intimacy of place – one that also takes the spatial tactics that constitute it into account.

Phenomenologists have often been accused of focusing too much on the intuitive and irrational and ignoring the social and historical determinants of life (for example: Eagleton 2008: 47-78; Foucault 1977: 165-197; Foucault 2002: 224; Geertz 1973: 12-13). Phenomenologists preoccupied with place, on the other hand, have argued that too many scholars have focused on the politics of place, without asking how place could assume a role of such strategic importance in the first place (Feld & Basso 1996: 4-5; Casey 1997a: 185-186; Malpas 1999: 10; Malpas 2006: 4-5). In saying that places are intrinsic to humans, that we are who we are only because of where we are, and in touching upon the dynamics that create ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’, I agree with John
Agnew and James Duncan who suggest that place needs to be looked at from all the different aspects that play into it. They stress that the severe marginalisation of place in modern social sciences as well as in history has much to do with the way scholars have come to look at it in an isolated way. Instead of seeing place as complemented by political, social, historical and sensory elements, scholars have tended to only focus on one singular aspect (Agnew & Duncan 1989: 2). In order to understand the lived experience of place, however, we need to see all the different elements as complimentary, as related and as dependent upon each other. When Omar, in telling me about his life as a story, thinks back to the places he passed, left or arrived at, the political and historical struggles that mould and remould a community or a place play such an essential role that I can’t ignore them. The power dynamics that make up a place are, I suggest, an intrinsic part of the lived experience of place.

As Omar’s account of the time he spent in Saudi Arabia shows, the feeling of being part of a place is closely linked to political realities. The Somalia Omar tells us about in the beginning of his life story is characterised by the changing role of the clan, the dynamics of exclusion and the horrible violence this brought forth. In his account of Mogadishu, this ‘dust-state’, the struggle over place and power that has left so many Somalis outside and estranged from their own country, becomes palpable. Likewise, immigration regulations, integration policies, work permits, and the bureaucratic labelling of different ‘categories’ of people (such as ‘migrant’, ‘refugee’, ‘asylum seeker’, ‘citizen’) have profound effects on the way people experience or identify with place. As Gill Valentine, Deborah Sporton and Katrine Bang Nielsen demonstrated in their comparative study of young Somalis in Aarhus in Denmark and in Sheffield in the UK, the realities of two very different integration policy frameworks played an important role in the way these young people identified with the places where they lived (Valentine et al 2009).

Who is to be seen as part of Australia’s ‘imagined geography’ (Said 1979), and who isn’t, is part of an ever-changing pattern of discourses. From the White Australia policy, which attempted to keep (this initially ‘black’) continent as ‘white’ as possible, to the changing face of the country as a result of the admission of a large number of Indochinese refugees in the late 1970s and early 1980s, these spatial tactics are continuously changing. In order for someone like Omar to be allowed ‘in’ however, he
needed to become a refugee first, someone in need of protection for his being outside of a “national order of things” (Malkki 1995b).

When Omar arrived in Melbourne in 1989, there were only a handful of Somalis in Australia, including his brother, who had been amongst the first Somalis to apply for asylum. Only twelve years before, in 1977, the then Minister for Immigration and Ethnic Affairs, Michael Mackellar had announced Australia’s first comprehensive refugee policy. As a result of that policy, the immigration department, which had already been in charge of Australia’s offshore program of identifying refugees for resettlement in Australia, also took control of the determination of refugee status for people who were already in Australia and applied for asylum. The question of who is admitted to Australia, be it as a refugee or as an ordinary immigrant, has always been highly regulated, with the government attempting to determine the size and composition of the intake.

Omar arrived in Australia shortly before the eruption of the civil war in Somalia and before the Australian government decided to resettle significant numbers of Somalis, Eritreans and Sudanese. This shift enhanced Omar’s case when he applied for asylum shortly after his arrival in Australia. Until then, not many African refugees had been resettled in Australia. This was partly due to “a legacy of racially biased preferences” and partly because Europe had once again become a source of a large number of refugees, a ‘legacy’ that persisted until 2002, when people from Southern Sudan came to dominate the resettlement program (Browne 2006: 21).

Looking at all the policies of inclusion and exclusion that are part of Australia’s spatial tactics, the outcome on a personal level can be, as in Omar’s story, indeed ironic. While he had left Somalia out of a mixture of a fear of an upcoming war, a spirit of adventure and the hope for economic advancement, here he was in Australia, accepted as part of the national community, but under the label of ‘refugee’. For Omar, who, as he told me later, never felt like a refugee, this bureaucratic label enabled him to stay, just as it enabled the Australian state to give retrospective meaning to his being-here. As much as spatial tactics attempt to regulate spaces and places, people will find ways to outwit them.
De Certeau (1984: 100) shows how, even through the simple act of walking, people can subvert the use of space as intended by architects or city planners. He speaks of a “walking rhetoric” that describes how pedestrians have a certain style of walking and, in using these styles, how they provoke a stylistic metamorphosis of space. Close to what has been described as “desire lines” (Murray, Shepperd & Hall 2007) – paths people choose to get from one place to another rather than using an official route – walking rhetoric carries away the proper meaning developed by planners and architects. In doing so it constitutes a movement “produced by masses that make some parts of the city disappear and exaggerate others, distorting it, fragmenting it, and diverting it from its immobile order” (De Certeau 1984: 102). It is exactly at this intersection of the state’s attempt to control and define its space and people’s ability to circumvent or contest these inscriptions that the ambiguity and moveability of place comes to the fore.

Although place is so often described as lasting and unmoving, as the effect of politically driven spatial tactics rather than as a constitutive element of politics, places are indeed everything but static. Places’ paths, shapes, meanings and habits change continuously – just like their inhabitants they are always on the move. Movement itself, Casey (1993: 280) suggests, is in fact intrinsic to place. Completely static places without movement or change don’t exist, for the mere fact of being there implies the possibility of journeying to another place. “If being on a journey is to be in or among places, to be in place is to be capable of journeying. Between places and journeys there is a relationship of mutual implication.” (Casey 1993: 289) However, we do not necessarily need to cross borders or oceans like Omar to get a sense of the ever-shifting meanings of places. Even in their everyday lives, individuals move between different places, changing the ‘hereness’ with every return.

If place is intrinsically tied to movement and change then we also need to look at all the different elements that constitute it – from its sensed intimacy to the political interplays of power that make themselves felt in places. In a world where the movement of some people becomes highly regulated and restricted, where detention camps are built in deserts and the term ‘boat people’ comes to stand for an outsidersness so extreme that it needs to be contained at all costs, we cannot even begin to understand the lived experience of place without looking at the politics of space.
In her book *Migrare*, the Italian philosopher Federica Sossi writes about how Europe’s spatial tactics of fortressing itself against ‘undesired’ people has created a situation where migrants and refugees *feel* national borders, and the spaces they are not meant to enter, long before they ever set foot on European (or, in this case, Australian) territory (Sossi 2007). They *feel* it queuing up in endless, hopeless lines at embassies, they *feel* it, when, like Omar, they are denied a visa because of the risk that they might not leave again, and they *feel* it when they cannot, like I could, go through customs with no more than a bored look from the immigration officer.
I still remember some advice my father gave us kids shortly after we had moved from the Netherlands to Austria. We lived in Riegersdorf, a small Carinthian village close to the Slovenian border for a few years, then we moved to my father’s home village Millstatt. When we were walking to school or playing with other kids, curious villagers often asked us “Von wen bistn du?” – “Whom are you from?” People in this part of Austria usually don’t ask where an unknown person is from, but to whom she belongs. In getting to know the family the person belongs to, they can place her on the larger social map of the area. If the family one ‘belongs’ to happens to come from another region, or, as in our case, from another country, people often react with an awkward silence. This embarrassment over our proper place within the village made us detest the constant questioning. My father instructed us: “The next time they ask you again, you just tell them that you come from your parents.” And laughing, he added: “In the end we all just come from Abrahams Wurstkessel.” We are all made of the same stuff.

Despite the three years I have spent in Melbourne speaking, reading and living with the English language, the word ‘home’ still puzzles me. Part of it might have to do with the fact that in German, there is no sufficient translation for the many connotations the English term carries. Although the origin of the word home, the Old English hām, is related to the German Heim, the German term mainly depicts a physical shelter. The English home, however, doesn’t just relate to a house or dwelling, but also to a much deeper, existential sense of belonging. Another word often used by translators to transfer the existential meaning of home into German, Heimat, rather hints at a sense of rooted or territorialised belonging – to the village where one is born, to the “homeland” or the “native soil” (Blickle 2002: 3-4). Heimat is deeply embedded in place, and, as Eric Hobsbawm argues, it is, by definition, collective. “It cannot belong to us as individuals. We belong to it because we don’t want to be alone”, he writes. But Heimat

The literal translation for ‘Abrahams Wurstkessel’ is ‘Abraham’s sausage pot’. It is a saying, commonly used in Austria to jokingly describe to children where babies come from. It refers to the biblical story of Abraham, the father of the people of Israel.
has a darker side: while we want to be part of it, it doesn’t need us. “It goes on quite well without us”, Hobsbawm writes, “which is the tragedy of political exile.” (Hobsbawm 1991: 68)

The histories behind *Heim* and *Heimat* have always made me keep my distance from them. The suffocating closeness of the bourgeois ideal of the *Heim*, its tyranny and control over women and children, made me look at it as a prison rather than as a romantic shelter. And the weight of *Heimat’s* blood-soaked abuse by the Nazis still weighs too heavily, and the consequences of its exclusionary tendencies have gone too deep, that I’d rather remain homeless, or *heimatlos*, than connecting myself with a stained *Heimat*.

From the very first day I met Omar, he told me that to him, Australia felt like home. “They allowed me to stay in Australia, they gave me the opportunity to become one of their own, they helped me to bring my mother and some of my immediate family members,” he said, “and I sometimes feel that I cannot even give that back to Australia.” Australia here takes on the form of a place and a community of people at the same time. Unlike in Saudi Arabia, where there was bare place but no community of people to share it with, Australia could become home to Omar because it allowed him to become “one of their own”. At the same time, feeling at home in Australia is a loyalty he owes the country for all the possibilities it opened up to him. “I am indebted to Australia,” Omar said.

As I got to know him better, the ease with which Omar was able to speak of Melbourne and Australia as his ‘home’ struck me more forcefully, for in many of our conversations we also spoke about the prejudices and misconceptions he was fighting against day in and day out being black, African and Muslim. The very first time I met Omar, he told me about his five children and how they were often struggling to understand where they belonged. Omar said: “When my kids were very young they believed that they were Australian. When they were young they didn’t believe that they were others, or African.”

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16 In the everyday use of the German language the term *zu Hause* (literally: at home) is much more common than the antiquated *Heim* or *Heimat*. Although it shares some characteristics with the English *home*, however, it is much more bound to a specific physical place than the English term.
At the time I did not realise the tragic depth of Omar’s story. Now, “they believed they were Australian”, echoes through my head. When they were young his children believed they were Australian, but now they are growing older they are made to believe they are ‘others’? And is being ‘other’, then, synonymous with being African? Or perhaps with being ‘black’? Or with being ‘Muslim’? Or perhaps with being ‘black’? Or with being ‘Muslim’? Or with being the children of a ‘refugee’ (who doesn’t consider himself a refugee!)? And are they, as a consequence, not at home in the country they were born in?

I am trying to imagine the pain Omar, as a father, must feel over this refusal by others to imagine his children as part and parcel of the very community he taught them they belonged to. He told me how, as his kids grew up and started going to high school, they were told by their classmates and their parents that they were not Australian but Somali. “All my five kids were born here. But people continuously ask them: ‘Where do you come from?’ ‘Do you like it here?’ So the children begin to question: ‘Who am I?’ And yet, despite painful moments like these in everyday life, Omar feels at home in this imperfect and at times exclusionary Australia. Immediately after he told me about his children’s struggles to find acceptance, he set himself above the diminishing effects of stories like these by having a laugh at them. He emphasised the humorous side of the situation by throwing the question of belonging back to those who ask it, troubling the assumption that their own position of belonging is safe and secure: “Now, when I’m interacting with [Australian] people and they say: ‘Where do you come from?’ I say: ‘I come from Somalia,’ Omar said. “But then I ask them: ‘What about you?’ And they will say: ‘I was born here.’ I say: ‘Yes, you were born here, but where does your father come from? Where do your grandparents come from?’”

In Australia, where being white almost invariably means having ancestors who, at some point in time, came to the country as immigrants, the dominant narrative of belonging seems to almost suggest the opposite. When the first white settlers came to live in Australia, they colonised the country under the premise that the land belonged to no one. And, as indigenous scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2003: 25) argues, within this rationale of Australia as a terra nullius, the white body became the norm and measure of identifying who could belong. Omar’s reversal of the question of belonging
refers the questioners back towards the complexity of asking who belongs where. His joke also perfectly illustrates how being-at-home seems to be intimately linked to questions of place and place-making.

When I am asked whether I feel at home in Australia, I usually don’t know how to answer the question. Even when I ask myself where my home is, the question evokes a feeling I can only describe as ‘confused nothingness’. It is the feeling of staring at a blank page – waiting for it to fill up with words, which, although they are there, racing around in my head, refuse to be written down. I could talk about images of places I strongly connect with, like the old graveyard at the Kalvarienberg above Millstatt, on the way up towards the mountain villages. I could talk about the tranquillity of the view from the graveyard’s chapel over the village, the lake and the mountains. But to call it my home, or to conclude from this place of connection that Millstatt in general is my home, isn’t how I feel. How I really feel, however, is hard to describe. Bachelard (1994: xxxviii) writes: “At times when we believe we are studying something, we are only being receptive to a kind of day-dreaming.” It is within the vein of the day-dream, somewhere in between the unconscious dreamlike imagination of the world and its conscious and reflected contemplation, that my experiences of home refuse categorisation.

Deep inside me, I might have thought that escaping to Australia would spare me the question of where my home is and make me feel part of a more cosmopolitan ideal of belonging. But becoming so deeply involved in the lives of my Somali friends had quite the opposite effect on me. It made me question why, although I didn’t experience any of the disadvantages my Somali friends struggle against, although I have always been welcomed with the kindest words by Australians, although I have found many friends and fallen in love with an Australian, I am so much more reluctant to describe Australia as my home. It made me ask what it is that constitutes a (or my) home. Can home be in different places at the same time? Does home have to be somewhere in place at all? What is the connection between home and place? Does my refusal to have a Heimat leave me without a home as well? Or is there, perhaps, no real place for my home?

How far does Omar’s acceptance of Australia as his home have to do with the fact that since the outbreak of the civil war, a return to his physical home in Somalia hasn’t been
possible? Beyond all the luxury of my chosen homelessness, I did not, like Omar, have
to learn that the places of importance where I grew up were destroyed, the knowledge
over their inner functioning forever displaced into a past that isn’t anymore. But perhaps
the way people story the ups and downs they go through in everyday life can best
illustrate how these processes formed them and made them see the world – and build
their own place (or home?) within it.

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At the time when I arrived in Australia, in 1988, the Somali issue was hot and
new – so many people in other countries were sympathetic to the Somalis’
plight. Not like now, where everybody got used to it and it has become what
they call a ‘déjà vu’. Even if they are talking about a hundred people killed in
Somalia now, they seem to only be mentioning that. Like, “oh, a couple of
hundred people died there”, as if they don’t even deserve to live. But at that
time it was easy to get a visa in Australia, it was easy to get approval from the
immigration department to live here, and I think it took me less than a year to
get the permanent residency, and two years after I became Australian citizen.

Immediately after I arrived I started working in a factory where they
put signs on t-shirts. It was a very tough job, especially when it came to the
speed, because you’re using a machine and you had to get the garment and put
it on the right place. And then as soon as the machine put the print on it you had
to take it out, get the next one and put it. You had less than ten seconds to do
that. And if you didn’t do it in time you made a mess because the machine was
not waiting for you, it was just stamping. So you had to be very precise: Put it,
take it off, put it, take it out, and so on. So it was a very hectic job. But that was
good, it was training me, I didn’t have a problem and I really enjoyed working
there.

It was in the factory that I encountered my culture and how different it was from
the Australian culture. I remember when I was working there I had a friend who
was actually much younger than me, about eighteen or nineteen years old. One
afternoon he told me that he was going to leave early that day because he was
going to pick up his mum’s boyfriend from another suburb. And I said: “You mean your mother’s husband?” And he said: “No, no, he is her partner.” And I said: “Is he married to her?” And he said: “No.” And for me, because of my culture, someone who was going to get someone from another suburb so he could sleep with his mum was something beyond my understanding. You know, up till now I’m still struggling to understand how someone is supporting that kind of activity where you get someone to stay with your mum even though he’s not married to her. But that’s the way it is and that’s where the issue of closing one eye comes in again.

Soon after my arrival I tried to study journalism but I realised that it was not easy for me to do it - or at least, I was discouraged by my teacher saying to me that my English was not enough to play that role. Now I think he could have encouraged me to improve and empower my English capacity instead of telling me: “You are hopeless, you can’t go there.” He didn’t really use the word ‘hopeless’ but he painted a picture where he argued that it wasn’t going to be easy for me to become a journalist. And he said: “You’re just wasting your time so you’re better off doing something else.” So then I left journalism behind and went to study international trade at RMIT.

When I was in the middle of that program, Somalia started to collapse and we got the news that all the people were leaving the capital, that they were displaced by the war, that they were living in different places. And my family was among those people – my mother, my sisters and my brothers. I decided to go back to Kenya to monitor the situation and [to see] if it was possible to get my mother out of Somalia – first and foremost. I could get the brothers and sisters out later on but at least I had to manage to get my mother out of Somalia. So I went to Kenya and I stopped my education at that stage. I started to financially support the people that I had left behind, so I couldn’t go back to university. Only after I had managed bringing my mother, my brother’s kids and my sister to Australia, I went back to university.

After my mum had arrived in Australia in 1991, other family members started coming. That’s why I kept working to make sure that I could pay for their
expenses wherever they were and also to help them to come here. My wife arrived in Australia a few months after my mother had come here. So she was the second one to arrive. We started to know each other when I was in Kenya to get my mother out. She was one of those people who left the country and came to Kenya. My wife was born and grew up in Mogadishu but originally she is from the same area where I come from. Our first child was born in 1992.

Back in Melbourne I started driving a taxi, but I didn’t like the taxi industry and I didn’t want to be a taxi driver. It wasn’t the kind of profession my father had expected me to have. My understanding was that it was a failure to me and to my father, to my family, to be a taxi driver. I understand that it’s an industry that supports many people. Many people working there are qualified people, much more qualified than I am, but I didn’t want to make it my permanent work. So I left it once and for all and I went back to university in 1998. I was living from the social security benefit and I was also working as a freelance translator to earn extra money to support the family.

In the daytime I was studying, in the night-time I was either translating or preparing my essays. Sometimes I used to sleep only three hours a day. Sometimes I used to find myself sleeping in the class. The teacher said: “What happened to you?” They probably thought that I was a drug-user or something like that. Given the fact that there is such a media hype about black men taking drugs, they probably thought that this guy sleeping in the class was under the influence of something like that. But that was life. I went through it, I finished my BA and my Masters. I also became father again and father again and father again in that process. – So it’s just life. It’s something that you just need to live with and accept it as it comes.

I recognize and fully accept that what my father was saying to me was right, that you cannot study and work and raise kids at the same time. He said that it was impossible. It was impossible but I did it. But it’s not easy to be a husband, father, student and worker at the same time.

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Brick by Brick

Sometimes, when we are removed from our familiar environment, we best understand the place we have left behind. By looking at the place we have left behind in another light, we also come to see ourselves in new ways. As Omar tells it, it was by becoming friends with Australians and by being confronted with their different ideas and values that he began to encounter his own culture. And looking back to where he came from also initiated the slow process of finding his place within Australian society.

The feeling of being-at-home didn’t, as Omar’s settlement story illustrates, come straight away. There were many hurdles to overcome. First there were the setback of his dream to become a journalist, the outbreak of the war in Somalia, which forced all of Omar’s thoughts and attention towards there, and the many years he spent working as hard as he could in a job he didn’t like in order to support family members, in Melbourne and back in Somalia. But slowly, step by step, he was able to overcome the hurdles and build his life around a here in Melbourne. With other family members settling here, with the formation of his own family here and with the achievement of his educational aspirations here, the here turned from a place of alienation to one of shared meaning.

In one of our meetings, Omar told me how dangerous he found the attitude of some of his Somali friends in Melbourne who kept dreaming about going back to Somalia. “Their bags are left unpacked, ready to go somewhere near the door, but nobody is actually taking them and going out,” he said. “That keeps them in a situation where they are not here and not there; neither in Australia nor in Somalia.” Omar deliberately became part of Australia; he said: “One has to sit down and say: ‘This is where I want to live, this is where I want my children to be raised and this is the life that I want to adapt to.’” For Australia to become Omar’s home, it required more than a shelter or a house to live in. It involved many years of home-building, of actively laying brick upon brick towards the feeling of being-at-home.

In his studies of Lebanese immigrants in Sydney, anthropologist Ghassan Hage (1997: 100-108) uses the term “home building” to describe the way the feeling of being at
home is assembled. He sees the home as an “affective construct” which is built out of “affective building blocks”. These building blocks, he argues, are “blocks of homely feeling” (Hage 1997: 102). They relate to four key feelings: security, familiarity, community and a sense of possibility.

Particularly the fourth of Hage’s affective building blocks opens the door towards an understanding of Omar’s home-building experience. The feeling Hage describes as “sense of possibility” challenges the notion of home as merely a physical and social shelter. Instead, it becomes attached with opportunities for change and improvement. “Most theorisations of home emphasise it as a shelter but, like a mother’s lap it is only a shelter that we use to rest and then spring into action, and then return to spring into action again”, Ghassan Hage (1997: 103) writes. “A space which is only a shelter becomes, like the lap of a possessive mother, a claustrophobic space and loses its homely character.” Thus, in order to feel at home, a home needs to be open enough to perceive opportunities to move forward in one’s life. In Omar’s case it was the possibility of education, of taking control of his own life, of deciding that this was where he was going to live and raise his children that laid the foundations to his feeling at home in Australia.

To arrive at a feeling of home, Omar’s story seems to suggest, we first need to come to feel at home within the feeling of being-at-home. Maybe it is exactly this – the feeling of being at home within the feeling of being-at-home that I am lacking. But, as Omar’s story shows, just as it takes time to build a house, it also takes time to build a home. This reminds me of the distinction between bauen (‘building’) and wohnen (‘dwelling’) Martin Heidegger makes in his 1954 essay Building Dwelling Thinking. He argues that while dwellings are produced through building, not all buildings are dwellings. For Heidegger, dwelling is a mode of being-in-the-world, which precedes building. “Only if we are capable of dwelling,” he writes, “only then can we build.” (Heidegger 1971: 160) While Omar was capable of laying bricks, plastering and doing the things necessary to build a house, we could say, it was only when the bricks became invested with emotions and moved beyond mere bricks and walls that the simple shelter turned into a home.
That my reading of Omar’s experience of home is so heavily saturated with constructional terms such as ‘building’, ‘brick’, or ‘plastering’ is not to suggest that home is mainly a physical shelter. Just like the English word, the experience goes far beyond it. For this reason, Alison Blunt and Robyn Dowling (2006: 2) define home as twofold – as a place and site in which we live and as an imaginary that is imbued with feelings. As opposed to Heimat or Heim, home allows for movement to be an intrinsic part of it – spatially and imaginary. A home, however much we are building towards it, always remains in the making. “People always live in an approximation of the ideal home”, Ghassan Hage (1997: 104) writes.

The imaginary strength of home, this feeling we are building towards and that seems to always slip under our fingers as we are trying to grip it, embeds the word with an aura of mystery. Omar, with whom I share a deep interest in the stories behind words, once told me that in the Somali language, just like in German, there is no sufficient translation for ‘home’. “There are two words that people use to differentiate between where they live and where they belong,” Omar explained. “Where they live is the house, which is guri in Somali, and where they belong is wadan, which means my country.” “So when people are not in Somalia anymore but somewhere else, like here in Australia, which of the two words would they use?” I asked Omar. He told me that the answer was difficult, as the whole concept of ‘home’ wasn’t translatable. “I think they use home, where home stands for where you live,” he said, “That’s what they use for the actual place of habitation. There are young people who say ‘Oh, that guy is feeling homesick’, and they refer to the English language rather than to Somali. So the Somali language doesn’t explain or refer to your country. The only word that they use for this is wadan, ‘my country’.”

As Omar explained, the outbreak of the war and the sudden importance of the clan complicated the translation of the idea of ‘home’ into the Somali context even further. The continuous violence between different clans forced people to move back to the regions associated with their own clans. For it is only on your ancestor’s land, Omar said, that you could find a secure and safe environment. For many years, Somalis from different clans moved around the country freely, settling in areas associated with other clans, but the war changed these dynamics dramatically. Many people were forced to flee to places associated with their clans to seek their protection. As a result, Omar
explained, Somalis now often refer to their home as the place where their clan has a stronghold. In fact, when in his story he talks about his wife, he says that she was born and raised in Mogadishu, but that “originally she is from the same area where I come from”. So although before she was forced to flee she had spent all her life in Mogadishu, she is again associated with the place her clan is believed to originate from. It took me a long time to understand that when I asked the Somali people I met here in Melbourne where in Somalia they came from, they very often referred to a place they had actually never been to.

While Omar stressed that Australia was his home, this didn’t erase Somalia from the feeling of being-at-home. In fact, many of Omar’s stories suggest the opposite. When he begins to talk about his settlement in Melbourne, for example, his thoughts quickly wander back to Somalia, where so many people have been killed over the last decades that Australians often react to reports of the violence with indifference. That people here, where his home is placed, react so indifferently towards the wellbeing of the people there, where he is at home as well, is a painful experience, signalling a feeling Hage (1997: 108) describes as “being there here”.

In the introduction to *Uprootings/Regroundings: Questions of Home and Migration*, Sara Ahmed, Claudia Castaneda, Anne-Marie Fortier and Mimi Sheller argue that home-building is about the recreation of “soils of significance”; it “depends on the reclaiming and reprocessing of habits, objects, names and histories that have been uprooted – in migration, displacement or colonization”. The project of home-building in the here and now, they argue, always involves the traces of an imagined past home of another time and space; being at home and the process of home-building are intimately connected to the idea of home, the idea of a place in the past and of this place in the future (Ahmed et al. 2003: 9).

On the same day that Omar told me how he had decided that Australia was to become his new home, he also told me that the Somali community in Melbourne, which had grown much bigger since his arrival here in 1989, was deeply affected by what was happening back in Somalia. I asked him how it feels to constantly receive terrible news from his home country. His answer has run through my mind again and again ever since. “You like to hear from your country, regardless of how far away you are,” Omar
said. “You’re born there, you have relatives there and friends. You feel sorry to see Somalia dying almost everywhere. The Somalian name demeaned and demolished on a daily basis. Somalia is equated to almost any bad thing now: Death, destruction, poverty, lawlessness, anarchy, piracy – anything that you can think of. And surely that has an enormous impact on those of us who left the country. Additionally, we always have people seeking our support. And that’s another burden on us. You cannot stay silent and you cannot satisfy everyone who needs your help, so you sometimes feel guilty by not supporting them. You feel guilty by giving money away where actually your children might need it. And it’s a dilemma, it’s a dilemma where you don’t know whether you should do this or do that. So we wake up with that anger and unhappiness, we walk with that, we work with that, we sleep with that – and it’s very unfortunate.”

I am still trying to imagine how it must feel to see, as Omar describes it, your home country ‘dying almost everywhere’, to live with this pain and burden day in, day out – and to still be able to build a new home here. But, as Sara Ahmed writes, home and away aren’t necessarily opposites. Home, she argues, is “elsewhere”, it “becomes the impossibility and necessity of the subject’s future”, where one never gets but is always going to, rather than a “past which binds the self to a given place” (Ahmed 1999: 331). Thus, it is exactly within the movement and journeying of people that we can begin to grasp the meaning of places and our connections to them. And because, as I mentioned before, we often learn most about ourselves when we are the furthest away from our familiar environment, in the next chapter I discuss these themes by focusing on the story of a return journey.
5. HOMEWARDS

Restless Minds

Many Australians I have met over the past three years gave me the impression that they were what Peter Berger, Brigitte Berger and Hansfried Kellner once called “homeless minds” (Berger et al 1973). Was it because working on my thesis made me more sensitive towards the topic, or was it perhaps because of my own homelessness that began to preoccupy me? Whichever way I came to see it, the homelessness I encountered in Australia has become an integral part of my thoughts on the meaning of home.

Here I am not only referring to the enforced homelessness of indigenous Australians whose displacement from the country that connects them to their Dreaming leaves them as trespassers on their own land. I am also (and even more so) speaking of the Australians whose ancestors came to this country and who, in many ways, seem to be at a loss as to how to feel towards this deep-red continent. I am speaking of moments when people who meet each other for the first time begin to recite their ancestry up to the generation that first came to Australia. “I’m half Scottish, half English,” you might hear from a person whose ancestors came to Australia as part of the first fleet more than two centuries ago. And very often, people even proudly announce the exact village or town in England, Scotland or Ireland, whence their ancestors originated.

In moments like these I often wonder why, generations later, it is of such importance to relate back to a home-place on the other side of the world. As if the here and now doesn’t offer enough (of what exactly isn’t all that clear) to feel at home in. As if generations after their family’s move to Australia, their minds haven’t settled here yet. Consider, for example, a conversation I had with an Australian academic. When he heard that I was Dutch-Austrian, he immediately asked me what on earth I was doing in Australia then, which, he said, was “culturally empty”. And without giving me the chance to reply he began telling me about the marvellous time he had spent in Germany studying art. He told me a story about something that had occurred many years ago and
had changed his way of thinking about Australia: He had just arrived in Germany and took the train from the airport to his final destination. He shared the compartment with an old man and a young girl whom he thought to be the man’s granddaughter. Overhearing their conversation, he realized that the old man was reciting poems by Goethe to the little girl, discussing their meaning with her. “At that moment I so deeply felt all that I had missed growing up in Australia,” he said, “this level of cultural depth that I was always left on my own with here.” While the academic said that socially Germany didn’t feel like his home – and, in fact, nowhere did, as he told me later on – culturally he felt that in that moment he had arrived. Similarly, my friend David told me that, years after his return from a year abroad in the Netherlands, he still has vivid dreams of cycling through Amsterdam: “I am cycling through the streets I used to cycle through when I lived there, and it feels so much like home. I feel more at home there than when I think about my hometown Wollongong.”

Isn’t it ironic that Omar, who whole-heartedly declares Australia to be his home, is so often put in the ‘refugee-box’ by the same people who seem to be much more at odds with their own feelings of belonging? The words ‘the migrant’ or ‘the refugee’ have come to be spoken in one breath with homelessness and non-belonging – accompanied by the assumption that to lose one’s home-place is to also lose one’s identity and place in the world. In many ways, the homelessness I encountered in many Australians and that marks my refusal to identify with a stained Heimat is a chosen homelessness, one that sits perfectly within the restless nature of (post)modernity.

It is a homelessness chosen by people who do not want to feel at home in a world that continues to be defined by borders, exclusions and injustices. It is a chosen homelessness that stems from a feeling of uprootedness that John Berger described to be the “quintessential experience” of our age. And it is a homelessness that, in various ways, desires the state of nomadic belonging embodied in the figure of the migrant or the refugee. Or, as Nigel Rapport and Andrew Dawson (1998: 23) write: “Exile, emigration, banishment, labour migrancy, tourism, urbanization and counter-urbanization are the central motifs of modern culture, while being rootless, displaced between worlds, living between a lost past and a fluid present, are perhaps the most fitting metaphors for the journeying, modern consciousness […]”
Within this world of restless movement, some Western thinkers have begun to champion migration, exile and nomadism not only as forms of dislocation from home, but as metaphors to think *without* home (Deleuze & Guattari 1986; Chambers 1994; Braidotti 1994). But isn’t it paradoxical that while a certain type of Western intellectuals has come to wilfully choose a migratory sense of belonging, people like Omar feel they have become incarcerated within the same migratory metaphor? Maybe Gaston Bachelard is right when he questions the use of metaphors. He suggests that a metaphor “should be no more than an accident of expression”, and that it is dangerous to make a thought of it, as it is only a “false image” (Bachelard 1994: 77).

The placelessness of the infinite universe, it seems, has brought with it the homelessness of our minds – because when there is no place to attach itself to, where, then, can home be? For Casey it is emblematic that Kant, who, as he argues, brought modernity to its most rigorous point, had no room for place in his conception of the human subject. “By this I mean not just that the very term ‘place’ drops out of his discourse regarding the subject […] but that the phenomenal self, the only self we can know, is radically unemplaced.” (Casey 1997b: 292) In Kant’s philosophy, the only unity of self becomes consciousness. “Beyond this frail and formal unity there is nothing more lasting to grasp – nothing substantial, nothing simple, nothing of the nature of an abiding self.” Casey argues that with Kant we reach the extremis of what was already prepared by Descartes: the modern subject as a placeless subject. “This subject, living only in the flattened-out sites it itself projects or constructs, cannot count on any abiding place in the world.”

In this strange world, where some people choose not to belong, where the intimacy of place is vanishing against the sheer endlessness of space, isn’t it more suitable to speak of ‘restless minds’ rather than ‘homeless minds’? For much of the estrangement from ‘home’ could only come about through the restless travelling so typical of our age of movement. And wasn’t it the act of travelling that prompted both, the Australian academic and my friend David to question their home-places?17

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17 As I told him about my thoughts, one of my Australian colleagues argued that these recitations don’t relate to a mythical home base – that they had in fact nothing to do with the countries they were referring to at all; rather, within the historical narrative of a nation founded on settler colonialism these seemingly innocent acts of reciting one’s ancestry could also be read as acts of claiming the land their ancestors had so violently taken off the indigenous people again and again.
With the heightened importance of journeying, people have come to see the places they left behind in radically different ways. And although chosen homelessness and placelessness might be an ideal upheld by many Western intellectuals, the estrangement felt upon returning back home in fact highlights the continuing importance of place. It is the act of homecoming that enables us to see the places we left behind in a new light. And it is through the changed look onto these home-places that, through journeying, we also come to see our self in new ways.

It is in this light that the last part of Omar’s life story, a story of his journey back home, can be looked at. That I happened to hear this story was almost an accident. After many meetings in his office in Carlton and the many hours he spent telling me stories about his life, we decided that our work on his life story had come to an end. After that we didn’t hear from each other for a couple of months. I had been evicted from my share-house in Brunswick with only a month’s notice, and having to look for a new place in the midst of a housing shortage was a task that took up most of my energy. I spent hours every day going through the housing offers, I queued up for inspections amongst dozens of other desperate house-hunters, wrote letters and tried to convince real estate agents that despite my low student income I was the best suitable candidate. With all the fuss about my chosen homelessness, how much effort I made when there was the slightest chance of really becoming homeless!

I met Omar again when I went to the wedding of one of Halima’s nephews. Much to my surprise, he told me that he had just returned from Puntland, his first trip back to Somalia. I had so many questions: How was it to see the place he had left behind after so many years? How much had it changed? And how much had he changed? “Let’s meet again soon, and I will tell you the story,” Omar said, laughing. And thus the story continued…

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In July 2011 I went back to visit Puntland for three weeks. It was mainly to see the people that I left behind thirty-five years ago. While I was away some of my family had passed away, so I was really concerned that many more would go before I could see them again. So I decided to visit them, to see their lives and
to spend time with them. I was also interested to see how much Somalia had changed.

The Somalia I visited wasn’t the country that I had left anymore; the people weren’t the people that I had left anymore; their lifestyle wasn’t the lifestyle that I knew anymore. That was very, very interesting. That is actually also how it is addressed by many academics, when they say that there is always a cultural shock when you go back and you have this cultural baggage behind your brain and you think that the people are still the way you left them behind. In fact that is not the case.

I visited my brothers and sisters, as well as the distant relatives, the cousins, in-laws, people who are either from my father’s side or from my mother’s side or even from my wife’s side. When I say in-laws I mean anyone who came through marriage related links. They call me, even when I’m in Melbourne. They call me or they call my brother or my sister and ask for some kind of support. So there has always been a connection. But to see them and to sit with them and talk to them is a different matter. It was really emotional.

We had four different houses in Gardo, and now they are all occupied by my sisters and brothers. One thing really moved me. I went into my father’s special room. It used to be always locked and nobody could get in except for the cleaners and my mother who was supervising that the job was done properly. And now it has become a house for my sister. That means that my brother-in-law actually lives in that room now. His bed is where my father’s bed used to be. Really, that moves me! I didn’t cry, but... My father’s position to be taken by another junior, unknown man and enjoying the luxury that he had made for himself, is something that really moves me!

But that’s the way it is. He was brought there by my sister, she lives in our house, and she has got the right to say where her husband lives. But this was one of the things that really moved me and showed to me how the structural changes are memorable.
When I went there, I was advised to have a security guard and I was provided with two men who were absolutely fully armed to go with me wherever I went. Sometimes I found that very uncomfortable. Because in Gardo, the town where I was born, I don’t want to have a bodyguard. In Gardo, where I grew up! And the people I was talking to were people that I knew. But they said: “You never know! Your brother is in a higher position in the government, you are elite…”

What really put me off was that I came back from a country that has no issues with me. In Australia I can go wherever I want, I can sleep whenever I want, I can walk wherever I want, without anyone even knowing me. But coming back to where I was born and where I grew up, I needed a security guard to protect me! That was something that made me question: “Ok, where is your country? Where do I really belong? Do I belong to Australia? Or do I belong to Somalia? Or am I half and half?” Surely, I’m not even five per cent Somali if I am given a highly armed man to protect my life, whereas in Melbourne no one even knows whether I’m here or not! But the issue of recognition and understanding and knowing you and feeling that there is ownership, that they own you, that you are their son, is also a different matter.

Near my house in Melbourne there is a coffee shop where I go almost every day, either in the afternoon or in the morning. Just to get a cup of coffee. I missed that place when I was in Somalia. But when I came back, nobody had even felt that I had been away. That again really makes me ask: “Oh, nobody even knew that you were not in Melbourne! So what is going on?” Back home, everyone knows my family, where I live, how many children I have, my situation, my education, my position in the community and so on. Getting that recognition tells you that you really belong to them. But then, when there is a bodyguard protecting you from them, that is another issue.

When I came back to Melbourne, I was interviewed by the ABC and the journalist asked me a question which was very interesting: “Where did you actually spend most of your time in your life?” I realised that the city that I spent most of my life in is Melbourne. The country where I spent most of my life is Australia. I left Somalia when I was twenty-two, I went to the Middle East, left
from there, went to India, I left from there and came here. So the country where I spent that many years is Australia, and not Somalia. The city where I spent most of my life is Melbourne. So I belong more to Melbourne than anywhere else!

I was telling that reporter: “Look, regardless [of] what Andrew Bolt\(^{18}\) says – if you asked him about me he would probably give you a totally different version – but I see Australia to be my country. I’ve got five kids, they are all born here, and they all belong here. I’ve got one house in the world, and that is in Melbourne. Ok? I graduated from different universities, they are all in Melbourne. If you look at all these facts, I’m more from Melbourne than from anywhere else, including the country where I was born and raised.”

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**World Inner Space**

Against the idea that journeying and continuous movement are romantic and rebellious acts in a world that tries to restrict home to an unmovable locale stand the pains and efforts connected with homecoming – of coming home to an estranged place and as a changed person.

When after years of restless travelling, Odysseus finally finds his way back to Ithaca, he is struck by the fact that Penelope has not changed at all. But he is also deeply shocked by the profound changes he observes in the place’s political and social life. In fact, Odysseus is unwilling to live with these disturbing differences and leaps into action to turn Ithaca back into what it had been before he left. The same feeling of estrangement and change can occur when we return to our hometowns, which appear “at once recognizably the same and yet disarmingly different” every time we go back (Casey 1993: 274). For Omar, going back home confronted him with an entirely different place.

\(^{18}\) Omar refers to the Australian journalist Andrew Bolt (2008; 2009; 2011) who in a series of provocative blog-posts in the *Herald Sun* newspaper had maintained that African immigrants were refusing to integrate and more likely to commit crimes than the wider (white) Australian community. Omar was interviewed by an ABC journalist about Bolt’s provocations.
from the one he had left behind. The country wasn’t the country he had left, he says, and the people weren’t the people he had left.

On my first visit back to Austria after only one-and-a-half years in Australia, walking through the streets of Vienna, which I still knew by heart, made me feel like a stranger. It was as if I was dreaming of myself walking through these streets, as if everything around me was so familiar and yet not real. The way people walked, the jokes they made, the stories they found interesting, appeared so strange to me, that I felt like somebody who had to learn how to walk and talk all over again.

Edward Casey (1993: 307) describes the feeling of place-alienation people often feel upon returning home: “Given this reciprocity of person and place, place-alienation is itself two-way: I from it, it from me. When caught up in this double-sided otherness, I feel, almost literally, ‘beside myself’. I feel myself to be other than myself and not just somewhere other than where I am in world-space (e.g., my exact address, my cartographic location, etc.).” In Omar’s story of his return journey, the painfulness of this double alienation comes to the fore in the opening of the once forbidden door to what used to be his father’s room. That upon his return he found the door of that room not only wide open but his childhood home’s entire inner life changed, touched him deeply.

In The Poetics of Space, Bachelard writes extensively about the meaning of our childhood homes. He argues that the house we were born in is physically inscribed in us (Bachelard 1994: 14). Images provoked by memories of our past prove that “the houses that were lost forever continue to live on in us”. Even more, “they insist in us in order to live again, as though they expected us to give them a supplement of living” (Bachelard 1994: 56). The memories of Omar’s childhood home in Gardo, the inner working of each room that had inscribed itself so deep in his imagination, were thrown into doubt by the opening of the forbidden door – an opening to changes that he describes as “memorable”.

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19 Bachelard’s images of a childhood home are culturally very specific; his topo-analysis relies heavily on bourgeois and Western ideas of home. While it is important to keep this in mind, I nevertheless argue that his book helps us understand ‘home’, as he also engages with universal, existential dynamics of place and dwelling.
Trying to make sense of the feeling of alienation both Omar and I had upon returning home, I am again turning towards Edward Casey’s philosophy. Homecoming can, he points out, lead to the paradoxical situation where I return to a place which I can be said to know for the first time, although I have in fact been there before (Casey 1993: 293). While the place itself is still the same place, returning to it after having been away can make us see it differently and yet more clearly than ever before. Exactly this feeling of alienation, which Omar describes in his story, highlights the importance homecoming can play for a new understanding of home. “It is as if I had to leave my home to become acquainted with a more capacious world, which in turn allows me to grasp more of the home to which I return”, Casey (1993: 294) writes. He points out that the movement of such a journey of departure and homecoming is one from part to whole and back to part. However, the second part directly reflects the whole, “for I now know my home in the light of the larger place-world through which I have traveled”.

Throughout his life Rainer Maria Rilke, a poet with whom I have grown up and with whose writings I am still growing, was preoccupied with the experience of the vastness of space. In the fourth stanza of his poem Es winkt zu Fühlung fast aus allen Dingen from 1914, he refers to the seemingly paradoxical situation of gaining intimacy from the world’s immensity:

Durch alle Wesen reicht der eine Raum:
Weltinnenraum. Die Vögel fliegen still
durch uns hindurch. O, der ich wachsen will,
ich seh hinaus, und in mir wächst der Baum.

Through every being goes a single space:
worldinnerspace. The birds fly silently
through us. O, if I wish to grow apace
I look outside, and in me grows the tree.20

Commenting on this poem, Bachelard (1994: 203) writes that it is through their immensity that the space of intimacy and the world-space begin to blend: “When human

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solitude deepens, then the two immensities touch and become identical.” While all beings are shot through with the immensity of this world inner space – what Rilke calls a Weltinnenraum – this shared immensity also enables us to reach outwards and attach intimacy to all other beings that inhabit this space (“the birds fly silently through us”).

This meeting point between the intimacy of place and the infiniteness of the universe may allow us to reconcile the modernist and postmodernist homeless mind with an understanding of home as in movement between the two. It is only by experiencing the vastness of space through journeying that we come to an understanding of the felt intimacy of places. Although Omar described Australia as his home, the story of his journey back showed that there were many homes within his feeling of being-at-home – and as many questions about these very homes. We are thrown back upon exactly these questions in the journeys we undertake in our everyday lives; such questions keep the idea of home in continuous movement. Just like home is, as Robert Ginsburg writes, “less about where you are from, but more about where you are going” (Ginsburg quoted in Mallett 2004: 77), belonging is not so much about a state of being but about ways of becoming. The very condition of being is to be continuously on the move and directed towards something or somewhere – or unterwegs (underway), as Heidegger (1962: 110) puts it. However much we are striving to reach a standstill, moments of pause and frozenness in place are, in fact, the exception and not the norm.

**Travelling Minds**

It comforts me to think of home as something that doesn’t force me to decide whether it is here or there. As Omar’s story shows, he has homelike and estranged feelings for both Gardo and Melbourne. While his hometown is where he feels that he is best known or “owned” by other people, the fact that he could only move about there with heavily armed bodyguards, made him question whether this was really his home. Upon his arrival back in Melbourne, Omar was again alienated, this time by the lack of ownership by others, but he also felt that this was the city where he and his children belong.

It is as if the feeling of home attaches itself to places – but in sync with our own to and fro journeys that change our look upon them over and over again. With the highlighted
importance of movement in the constitution of place, can we thus use James Clifford’s (1992: 103) often-applied metaphor of “dwelling-in-travel” to describe Omar’s experience of home? I once discussed this question with Omar. I confronted him with an article I had just read which touched in new, and for me compelling, ways upon the importance travelling has in Somalia. While many authors have written about the historical importance of nomadic movement, trading expeditions and seafaring for Somali culture, this text related to the expression of an inner, spiritual urge for movement. The article’s authors write about a common belief in Somalia that people who desperately want to leave the country are possessed by the saar (spirit) of travel. To cure persons possessed by it, the healers ask the saars to reveal the causes for the misfortune. In return, the saar expresses his wishes and promises to leave once they have been fulfilled. The authors write that very often, to help a person possessed by the travel saar, the community has the responsibility to mobilise the affected person to go on a journey in order to satisfy the spirit’s desires (Rousseau et al 1998).

When I had finished my summary of the article, Omar laughed. He had never heard about any such thing as a travel saar before. “Look,” he said, still chuckling, “nowadays we’ve got so many writers who just come up with something and write it, to amaze, surprise, and make the reader laugh. Many of them are not accountable to what they’re doing.” Then he told me a story – another travel story – that had made him see the reasons behind people’s desire to move in new ways: “In 2001, I was in Malaysia. One day I was talking to an old Malay man. I asked him: ‘Have you ever travelled from one place in the country to another?’ He said: ‘Why should I?’ And I said: ‘Why not?’ He replied: ‘Look, what I can get in my particular space is what I can also get in a far distant area.’ He said: ‘I don’t need to travel to somewhere else. Because I have what I need here.’ And really, that impacts me strongly! Because I realised that why people move from place to place is to change their life, to enhance their lifestyle, to achieve more, to learn more, maybe to get peace and stability. This guy has peace, he’s got a little space where he can plant vegetables and harvest them whenever he wants to. He’s got a river he can go to and get fish out of. So why should he travel from place to place?”

Again, Omar’s story reveals how far away metaphors can be from people’s lived experience. While it is appealing to think of belonging in terms of “dwelling in
travelling”, Omar reminds us that the very meaning of travelling itself isn’t all that unproblematic. He told me that “apart from those who started to go out just to have an experience, people don’t travel for the sake of luxury. They travel for the sake of changing something in their lives. In most of the cases they are not happy with where, how and what they have in a particular place. So to achieve more, they have to go somewhere else, where they can get a better life.” Omar felt very uncomfortable describing his own situation in terms of “dwelling in travel”. For him, travel doesn’t stand for borderless belonging, but quite the opposite: the need to travel only arises from a feeling of discontent with oneself or the place one is currently at. To be at home in travelling would thus accept a never-ending repetition of the very discomfort that has led Omar to leave Somalia in the first place. It would constantly reinforce a feeling of restless commotion, of losing hope to ever arrive anywhere. But although the move away from Puntland has, at times, been painful, although settling in Australia involved many hurdles, and although his home in Australia is everything but perfect, what counts for Omar is what he actively makes out of these situations to overcome them.

While Omar attaches feelings of being-at-home to different places, and while the meanings of these places are continuously on the move, the act of travelling itself doesn’t constitute his home. Yet the importance of travelling shouldn’t be dismissed entirely. Sara Ahmed’s work offers an explanation that highlights the importance of change and yet doesn’t lose sight of the importance of the intimacy of place. She suggests that the lived experience of being-at-home engages subjects in a space which is not simply outside of them. Instead, subject and space leak into each other, they inhabit each other (Ahmed 1999: 341). She relates the lived experience of home to the image of inhabiting a second skin. Similar to Rilke’s Weltinnenraum, this skin does not only ‘house’ the subject, but also allows the subject to touch and be touched by the world. “The home as skin suggests the boundary between self and home is permeable, but also that the boundary between home and away is permeable as well. Here, movement away is also movement within the constitution of home as such.” (Ahmed 1999: 341)

If we look at home as a second skin that allows us to simultaneously touch and be touched, then being-at-home is an imagination, in that it is always in the making and in that the ideal home is what we are always striving for but never arrive at. It it is also a sentiment, in that being-at-home is so close to our innermost feelings that it becomes
hard to theorise. Within this tension between the imagined and the lived, we can read Omar’s story of his journey homewards – a homewards that is familiar and alienating, here and there, now and then, inwards and outwards.

I am ending Omar’s story with his own words. They relate to both: home as a sentiment and home as an imagination, and for him encapsulates the experience of being-at-home. They came about as a response to my question whether he could explain to me what home was to him as opposed to where it was.

I think home is where you are happy. I think home is where you are satisfied. I think home is where you are respected. I think home is where you are entitled to. I think home is where you are seen as another human being. There’s a Somali proverb that says: ‘Waad taqaan qofka kuu sokeeya laakiin ma taqaanid qofka kuu roon. – You know who is closer to you in terms of bloodline, but you don’t know who will help you more when you need them.’

Yes, I’m Somali and I’m born Somali from one of the Somali families, however, I didn’t choose to be born Somali, it just happened that way. But I believe Australia offered me more than what Somalia offered me in terms of the past and in the present.

When the time passes your needs differ. I always sleep with my wife side by side, sometimes holding her and sleeping in that situation. There was an era when I couldn’t sleep without my mother’s lap. The things have changed. So within that change – what will control you and decide and shape your life is where you feel more comfortable. Whether it is sleeping next to your wife by holding her, or whether it is sleeping and lying in your mother’s lap. It’s the comfortability, and that’s where it goes back to. If I go back to Somalia but Somalia cannot provide me at least the minimum of what I need, the security, forget about anything else, then surely Somalia is not my country, is not my home. My home is where I’m happy.
When Mohamed and I first looked through the photos he had taken in Mogadishu, I almost skipped this image. Somehow the emptiness, the greyness, the absence of liveliness it depicted, made me believe that the image had no story to tell: as if it had been taken by accident; as if its very existence was displaced. Yet, Mohamed asked me to have a closer look. “What do you think this is?” I had no idea. To me, the photo gave no sense of the place it depicted.

“This was a TV studio and that’s what’s left,” Mohamed said, laughing ironically. “The rest is gone.”

Mohamed had been shocked when he entered this room. It used to be the studio of Somalia’s national news. The presenter used to sit at that desk. During the war, people looted the studio, leaving nothing but the old, rusty desk and a broken air-conditioner, its wires and hose spreading over the empty floor. Mohamed found it unbelievable that simply nothing had been left behind that reminded of what the room had once embodied: The pride of Somalia’s own national television station. Founded after
independence, it had become the nation’s voice, eye and ear. Mohamed found it hard to describe a place like this: ravaged, empty, stripped of its meaning and life. Looking at the photo a feeling of compassion engulfed both of us for this naked, abandoned room – as if it wasn’t a room but a person.

Rather than displacement, this image embodies de-placement – this is a place that has been emptied of itself and its inner workings. Yet, is this really the end, the death of a place? Can there be such a thing as naked, unbounded space? In other words, can there be a placeless place? What about Mohamed’s imagination, where the studio, its former pride and its beauty still lives on and plays into his ways of encountering the being-here?

Maybe the image captures displacement, but not as an end in itself or as something that deteriorates into unbounded nothingness. Rather, this unboundedness could be read as a clearing, as an opening towards the imaginary, which, in turn, contains the boundless.

“And always into the unbounded a languorous longing goes”, Friedrich Hölderlin (2008: 254) writes.
IV
DISPLACEMENT
I was born in the central part of Somalia, in Buuloburde, which is in the Hiiraan region. I was born in Buuloburde but I didn’t grow up there. After I was born, we went to Galcayo because my father was a policeman, and he was transferred to different places all the time.

My mother was a very helpful mum, a very beautiful mum – as they told me, because I can’t remember much. But I heard her history from my sister and my father. She used to do small business. She got stoves from Hiiraan, stone stoves, and she sold them around Galcayo. She died when I was six years old. My mum was pregnant and when she was giving birth, she got a bleeding and her child died. Thirty minutes afterwards she also died. When we lost my mum, my father was not with us. He was sick and that’s why he had gone to Mogadishu to see a doctor. So people told him: “Your wife died,” and he came back. When he returned, he called all of us kids together and he told us that our mother had died.

My mother had left nine kids behind, three boys and six girls. One of the boys didn’t live with us. He used to live with our grandparents. But even that boy came when my mum died. When we came together, every person was crying for us and saying: “How can they survive?” I remember my sister telling me that my father had answered: “They will survive, because God has taken my wife, but he also created these kids, so I’m sure they will survive.”

My oldest sister Zeinab was thirteen years old then, and she took over the responsibility for the family. She lives in Dubai now. She looked after us and she always said: “Go to school. Go to learn the Qur’an!” And if we were disappointed or sad she reminded us: “Our mother died but do you want to show all the people that we don’t have a family, you want to show them that you
are weak? They will not respect you if you do that!” She helped us to build our self-esteem.

When mum died, my father asked for his job to be moved to Mogadishu. But the government said: “No, you will be transferred to Hargeisa!” But Hargeisa is far away, so he said: “No, I’m not going there!” And they said: “Then you have to leave the police. We will dismiss you.” And he decided, and he said: “Dismiss me, but I don’t want to go to that place, because my children are little kids and they need people that they know or an area that they can understand. That is too far for me and I have never been there. In Mogadishu I have some family, I have my brothers there, so they can look after my kids, they can help me.” When they dismissed him, he talked to his brother and asked him: “Can you help me if I move to Mogadishu?” He said: “I will give my life for your kids and you!” So that’s how we came to Mogadishu. When we came to Mogadishu my uncle took the responsibility over the kids. He said: “Until you get a proper job I will look after your kids.” We grew up in a very big family, we loved each other.

My brother who had never lived with us came to stay with us too. It was hard for him to get used to the new environment in the beginning, because he had grown up in the countryside and we had grown up in the cities. When my father got his first child, my grandmother had said to him: “When you get your second child I need that one to keep it for my heart, because you are moving anywhere, and I want to have someone around me.” She loved her son. So that’s why my brother stayed with my grandparents in Xaafun, which is a coastal area in Puntland.

My uncle gave us the opportunity to go back to school, to go to the religious schools from morning to evening and we were taught to nurture each other, to help each other, and we never allowed people to hurt us. My sisters were very, very brave. My sisters Sahra and Zeinab and my two older brothers were connected, they said: “We have to look after these kids.” They were kids too, but they didn’t feel that. They felt like parents, they took that position.

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Meeting Halima

Very rarely does a first encounter with someone leave an immediate imprint inside oneself. It is as if this stranger, by mere presence, touches on something so deep, so difficult to grasp and yet so palpable that there is an instantaneous connection, turning strangeness into something familiar. Meeting Halima for the very first time was such an encounter.

For weeks I had carried her phone number around with me, postponing that very first call. Although Omar, who had given me her number, had encouraged me to talk to her, saying he believed she could be interested in participating in my research, a phobia about talking to strangers on the phone had kept me paralysed. When I finally convinced myself to pick up the phone, however, Halima’s response was so welcoming, that all my nervousness immediately vanished. “Oh, it’s you, darling,” she said after I had introduced myself, “I have been waiting for your call.” She invited me to come and meet her at Federation Square in the city centre the next day. She told me that she would spend the whole day there, painting a container for the Peace Project.

On the phone Halima told me what the project was about. She told me how Ahmed, a young social worker from Melbourne’s northern suburb of Flemington, had returned from a visit to his hometown in central Somalia recently, shocked by the way children were trapped in a vicious cycle of poverty and conflict. He had found his town’s children gathered under a large tree, patiently awaiting the arrival of a man who volunteered to teach them in the shade of that very tree with what little means he had. Ahmed had taken photos back to Melbourne, showing children so eager to learn that they used the barks of trees on which to scratch the letters of the Arabic alphabet they were learning. There were no books, no pens, no chairs, no blackboards – let alone a house that could shelter them from wind or rain.

Back in Melbourne, Halima had been so touched by these photos, that she and Ahmed, together with Halima’s friend Pauline Crosbie who ran a small NGO in Melbourne, began to think about what they could do to help. As a result, the Peace Project came into being. Their idea was to motivate the Somali community in Melbourne to work together, and regularly send containers with furniture, schoolbooks, pens and clothes, as well as money, to different regions in Somalia to help set up basic schools and employ
teachers. Shifting the focus between different regions was intended to prevent Somalis in Melbourne from only helping the areas where their clans had a stronghold. Halima told me she hoped that conflicting clans living in Melbourne working together would send a signal of reconciliation to the communities receiving help in Somalia. She also hoped it would be the beginning of a healing process within the fractured community in Melbourne. The container that was about to be sent to Ahmed’s hometown, painted with colourful messages of hope and reconciliation, was the beginning of the Peace Project.

When I went to Federation Square the next morning, I found the container Halima had told me about on the boulevard next to the Yarra River. Three women were busy painting colourful motifs onto it. When I approached them, Halima immediately knew who I was – and I immediately knew who she was. A tall and self-confident woman in her mid-fifties, dressed in an apron and laughingly swaying a tin of paint, she welcomed me. Within no time I, too, held a paintbrush, and I was to spend many hours painting with Halima, her youngest daughter Sagal and their friend Pauline.

Sitting under the burning sun, the brush moving monotonously up and down, and colour patterns ever changing, created a somewhat meditative atmosphere. It opened us all up to sharing stories and jokes, but it also created a space where it was acceptable to withdraw into oneself, lulled by the rhythm of the paintbrushes and the sounds of the surrounding city. Throughout the day, curious passers-by would come and ask about the project, some of them picking up a brush and joining us for a while.

And so brush stroke by brush stroke, layer upon layer, we slowly got to know each other.

By the end of the afternoon Halima took me aside: “Let’s go and have a glass of orange juice together.” As we sat down in the shade, she told me how she had arrived in Australia as a refugee and how, soon after her arrival, she was diagnosed with a serious illness. She told me how the doctors had only given her a fifteen per cent chance of surviving and how she had spent a long time in hospital, her children devastated by their mother’s deteriorating state.

“But I’m still alive!” she said to me, laughing. “In the hospital I believed that it wasn’t time to go yet. I believed that I needed to help my community and go back to
university.” She told me how, soon after she had left the hospital, she began studying community development and welfare and how straight away she had started to work on her own ideas to support Somali women in Melbourne. “Helping my community has helped me survive,” she said. Listening to her energetic stories of the numerous projects she was working on at the same time, it was almost unimaginable to me that she had just survived a terrible illness. “Why do you prefer to work with women?” I asked her. Halima laughed. “Because I’m fed up with Somali men,” she said. “When you give them the funds to rebuild the community, they will go and spend it on guns. If you give that money to women, they will use it in the interest of their families to build towards a better future.”

Sitting under the shade of a large, beautiful gumtree, we observed a group of children inspecting the giant African animals Halima and Pauline had painted. “Just imagine how the children in Somalia will love the stories we painted onto this container!” Halima said. We both smiled at the idea of the native Australian bush flowers we had just drawn flowering somewhere in Somalia.

I had already told Halima about my thesis during our phone conversation the day before, and I had also told her that I was looking for people who would be interested in working with me on their life stories. But I hadn’t raised the topic again. Having spent the whole day in the burning hot sun painting and seeing the exhaustion on her face, I thought it best not to bother her with the details of my project. I was happy to just be there and in that moment, without having to think about my research. But while we were enjoying our rest, Halima brought it up herself. “Look,” she said, “I am very happy to tell you about my life so that you can use it for your thesis. I want people in Australia to understand our stories.” I told her that I would be keen to listen to her stories. “But you have to understand,” she said, “there are things I cannot speak about. I had a devastating time fleeing Somalia, and for many years I didn’t know where my husband was.” I promised that I would never pressure her to speak of things she didn’t want to speak of. “You will decide where your story goes,” I said. “That’s good, darling”, she said, putting her arms around me. “You need to come and visit me in my house soon.”
That day, when Halima and Sagal hugged me goodbye, I knew that I hadn’t just found an interviewee – I had found new friends. I had found a family that, over the months to come, would give me the feeling of being-part-of that I so often missed in Melbourne because I didn’t have my own brothers and sisters around me. I had found a family ready to take me in as one of theirs, as a daughter, sister, loved one. In Halima I had found the unconditional, calm, protecting warmth of motherly friendship. Her concerned phone calls when we haven’t heard from each other for a few weeks have become an intimate part of the texture of my own emplacement in Melbourne. In Halima I had also found someone to whom my stories mattered as much as the stories she came to share mattered to me. And having one’s story valued, I have come to understand, is a key building block towards the feeling of being-at-home.

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Fantastic Days

In 1968 my father got a job with the airport security and he got a good salary - at that time the airport was different than nowadays. My father always talked to us, he never ever beat anyone. He would call for us and say: “Look, if you want to help yourself, I will help you!”

On Fridays he took all of us to the sea and we swam there. He took a ball with him to play basketball or football or whatever we kids wanted. And when we came back he said: “The person who got the best mark at school last week will
order what he likes, and all of us will eat that food today.” That was the punishment for the person who didn’t do well at school.

We loved Fridays! He would say: “It’s Friday-time, you have to prepare yourselves, we will go swimming from the morning until the afternoon.” We walked a very long distance because we didn’t have a car. So we walked a very long distance to swim in the sea and then we would walk back. And when we came back everyone was happy. Then we would have a storytelling time with my father. He always talked about the ability of God, how he created this world. We went outside and lay down on a very beautiful mat, we took our pillows and we all had to look up into the sky and see the stars and the moon. And my father told us: “Do you know who created all this?” And we said: “Yes, father, God created it!” When he finished whatever he wanted to tell us, whether it was fiction or a true story, he said: “Okay, this is the time to pray now.” But we were kids and I said: “Father, it is very cold, I cannot go to the water now and wash myself!” And he said: “Oh, you are not a good believer! Why are you saying that? God who created this world, who created this sun, the moon, the stars, is looking after us, and you don’t want to pray!” – “Father, I will pray.” – “Good girl.”

I never forgot this. I passed the stories to my kids. Even my daughter in America says to me now: “Mum, I always have your storytelling in my mind and I give it to my children.” So it was good, we were a very well-connected family, and my sisters helped us to keep in touch with our study, with our culture, looking after each other. So what I’m always thankful for to my father is how he created this environment.

I remember when we first started to have a home in Mogadishu – we built it by ourselves. No one built it for us. Only for the toilet-hole we got workers. Other than that we built our home with our own hands. And we created a four-bedroom house. My father married another woman. She lived in one room, my uncle lived in one, the boys in one and the girls in one.

It was very good to have that connection, and I am still holding that happiness in my family. Me and my sister here, Sahra, we were so close then and we are still
so close. When we are talking about our past and we remember, we sometimes hold each other and we cry because what we feel is that these were fantastic days. When she hasn’t seen me for a week, she calls and she says: “What happened to you? Don’t you remember that you never used to sleep without hugging me - and now you are sleeping seven days without even talking to me?”

I like to look after people, I like to help create good families, and that was the thing that my father always guided us in. He was saying: “Look, if you want something good to happen to you, you have to make something good happen to others.” You know? I feel that this kind of connection stays in my own and my sister Sahra’s home now. She has lots of children and for instance, last Saturday her son prepared a beautiful picnic. We were cooking and everyone came together and we were eating together. All the members of the family were together, so the house was full. Me and my sister were sitting in the corner of the house and were looking at what was going on. She said: “Halima, does this remind you of your past?” I said: “Yes!”

It’s beautiful to have family and the family is the best thing to have, all your future happens with them. If you missed that kindness, if you missed that nurturing, if you missed that helping each other in the first stage of your life, you would never get it back. It would be gone. Sometimes I feel really, really sorry when I look back at my country and see the kids that are born and grow up in these fights, and they don’t have any other idea about life. It makes my heart hopeless. This is the generation with whom we wanted to change the future and they already don’t have any idea about life.

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Memory Places

While Halima had warned me that there were things in her life that resisted storying, the memories of her childhood in Mogadishu came about with ease. Part of it might have to do with the fact that by the time she told me these stories, I had already visited her in
her family home, had met her children and husband, and she had told me many stories about her life. Sharing cups of tea in the small Iraqi Kebab café in Footscray she had chosen as the place for telling me the recorded stories, the lightness and homeliness of these “fantastic days” of her life felt ghostly present. The warmth and protection of her sisters, shielding her against any harm from the outside world, her father’s guiding stories, told under starlit skies, and the joy of “Friday-times” – all these were elements of a storied past, but they felt so close, so here, that in the end we were both infected by a weightless cheerfulness. When the storytelling came to its end, we were both surprised to see that the initially empty café was now crowded with people eating lunch. We had both been so in the story, that we hadn’t noticed what was happening around us.

“It felt good telling you these stories,” Halima sighed when I turned the audio recorder off. “I also felt good listening to your story,” I said. “I felt as if I was there with you, on the beach in Mogadishu.” She smiled. “It always makes me feel happy when I remember these times and especially when I can speak of my father. He was a fantastic father. Masha'Allah – may God reward him with paradise!”

While Halima’s childhood narrative doesn’t reveal many details of the physical features and characteristics of the place where she grew up, the story still carries a deep sense of emplacement, of being-part-of. It gives a sense of emplacement by giving an insight into the way the nurturing sense of the childhood home engravés the different functions of inhabiting into us. And, to once more return to Bachelard’s phenomenology of intimate places, the imprint of this first way of inhabiting can be so strong, so powerful, that all other places we come to inhabit afterwards often are nothing more than variations on this fundamental theme (Bachelard 1994: 15). In this, the recollection of the intimate and idyllic – or in Halima’s words, “fantastic” – days of her childhood in Mogadishu point towards the importance of the interplay between memory and place.

In his tremendously detailed phenomenological work Memory, History, Forgetting, Paul Ricoeur emphasises that memory, body and place are so closely tied together that it is impossible to think the one without the other. The things remembered, he stresses, are intrinsically associated with places. When we speak of something that happened, it is therefore not coincidental that we say that it “took place” (Ricoeur 2004: 41). For Ricoeur, inhabited places form the strongest ties between memory and place – so much

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so that he speaks of memory places – places, which remain as inscriptions inside of us. While memories that are transmitted orally “fly away as do the words themselves”, these memory places remain inside of us as reminders of things past. “Places inhabited are memorable par excellence. Declarative memory enjoys evoking them and recounting them, so attached to them is memory. As for our movements, the successive places we have passed through serve as reminders of the episodes that have taken place there. They appear to us after the fact as hospitable or inhospitable, in a word, as habitable.” (Ricoeur 2004: 42) It is through the memory of the places of our past, of the having been there, that all the elsewheres take shape. In Halima’s story, the memory place of her childhood days has inscribed itself so deeply into her self that she stories it as the very condition for her ability of re-emplacement in Melbourne.

While memory and place form a dynamic relationship, Halima’s story points towards a third ally. The power of the story is the thing that continuously builds bridges between memory and place. It is only through the storying of memories that places take shape as something lived, meaningful and felt rather than as empty vessels. It is through narratives that people tell and retell the world and in doing so, continuously reorganise their habitation (Rapport & Dawson 1998: 29). Within the same lines, archaeologist Leslie Van Gelder describes stories as “thistle seeds” that link experience to place and one experience to another. “How else can we know the mountains, canyons, and wild rivers inside ourselves, and inside others,” she asks, “unless we hear the most extraordinary tales in the world – the stories of how we live our lives?” (Van Gelder 2008: 12)

By telling the story of her life Halima brings me closer to an understanding of how all the places she passed through have made her the person she is in the moment of the telling. Perhaps it isn’t surprising that these stories aren’t necessarily saturated with details of the physical features that make up these places, because it is through sharing and storying meanings with others that these places come to life and take on importance.21

21 This is not to suggest that objects and physical features cannot play an essential role in the memory-place-story triad. For many indigenous Australians, for example, land and being are so inextricably linked, that memories of places of important connection to a person’s Dreaming describe every tree, stone, or waterhole as quintessential parts for the existence of the place. To cut a tree isn’t simply eliminating a feature of the landscape. It is to kill the land – and through the land the sense of self.
The Past, a Foreign Country?

In *Yesterday, Tomorrow*, novelist Nuruddin Farah describes the impact of the events of one day in 1976. He was planning his return to Somalia from a visit in Europe, but in a telephone conversation his brother advised him to stay away because he risked arrest. “A few minutes later, still clutching the dead telephone receiver, I felt as though something live was surging up from inside of me: in that moment another country was fired into existence, a new country with its own logic and realities.” (Farah 2000: 49) In the years to come, decades of drifting between countries, Farah would rely on his imaginative country to dwell in and carry him through difficult times. Memory and imagination thus played a quintessential role in his process of creating another, a new home.

So powerful is the role of the imagination that Farah (2000: 49) asks what happens to people who cannot access it. What happens “to a people who cannot go back to the hypothetical reality of their homes, nor to their actual residences? Is this the clay out of which refugees are moulded?” Those people who cannot find shelter within the realms of their imagination, Farah says, become the true embodiment of the helplessness and hopelessness that the figure of the refugee has come to stand for.

While for Farah it was through and in his storytelling that he was able to create a place to feel at home in, for Halima, the storying of memory takes over this enlivening role. As shown in the previous chapter, when I asked Omar to tell me about his childhood place, the stories he told me were saturated by the harsh reality of present-day Somalia. He couldn’t revel in the beauty of a past place without having the horrors of its present state trumping. Asked the same question, Halima told me a very different story, one that encapsulated all that has happened to her home-place Mogadishu ever since and one that returned to the fantastic days that constituted her childhood memory place. Although clearly situated in the past, the story was, in fact, so powerful, that both, Halima and I felt strangely vivacious and happy at the end of it – as if a little piece of the there and then had come to touch us in the here and now.

The fact that both Halima and I had felt the story’s intensity in our bodies, made me wonder whether the story’s beauty had somehow made us both long to be *there*, in that
memory place, instead of here, in the café in Footscray. It made me wonder whether the memory of this idyll points towards a nostalgic yearning for the past.

Nostalgia hasn’t had a very honourable reputation in Western thought. Associated with invention and a certain sense of manipulation of the past, it is often despised for its failure to acknowledge the complexity of the past and for its tendency to be instrumentalised by political forces (for example: Nietzsche 1957; Davis 1977; Shaw & Chase 1989; Kammen 1991). Derived from the Greek words nostos, which means ‘to return home’ and from algos, which means ‘pain’, nostalgia depicts the painful yearning for the past. In the late seventeenth century, Swiss physician Johannes Hofer described this emotional state as Heimweh (homesickness) and likened it to a disease.

In Yearning for Yesterday, a landmark sociological study on nostalgia that was first published in 1979, Fred Davis (2011: 448) points out that the state we generally conceive of as nostalgia involves more than “mere past”. “It is a past imbued with special qualities, which, moreover, acquires its significance from the particular way we juxtapose it to certain features of our present lives.” Davis stresses that nostalgia sets itself apart from other forms of looking back in time through its adoration of the past, which triumphs over the present time. He specifically focuses on collective nostalgia and describes it as a reaction to disruptive events and as a means of recreating continuity. Svetlana Boym (2001) extends Davis’ notion of nostalgia beyond the collective and political, and points out its paradoxical nature that keeps on moving between individual and communal biographies or memories. Nostalgia keeps on going back and forth between algia, longing, and nostos, the return home, and it is this very movement that has the potential to effect both, a possibility for healing and the danger of creating a phantom homeland for which one is ready to kill. Boym stresses that while nostalgic longing can make us more empathetic towards the plight of other human beings, it is often exactly in moments when we attempt to repair the apprehension of loss with a rediscovery of identity, that this mutual understanding ends (Boym 2001: xv-xvi). While it is exactly the abuse of the nostos part of nostalgia by reactionary forces that has led to its negative image, Boym (2001: xvi) stresses that nostalgia needs to be taken more seriously as it is at the core of the modern condition: “It is not necessarily opposed to modernity and individual responsibility. Rather it is coeval with modernity itself.”
Nostalgic memories of childhood days have been a common theme in modern Western literature. In L.P. Hartley’s novel *The Go-Between*, for example, an old man named Leo Colston finds the diary he wrote as a thirteen-year-old. This unexpected discovery brings back long-forgotten childhood memories. Reminiscing about the innocence and beauty of his childhood days, Leo feels a painful yearning for times that appear forever lost. "The past is a foreign country;” Hartley (1971: 7) writes, “they do things differently there." The nostalgic mourning for an irretrievable past expressed in Hartley’s novel can be read within the lines of a wider modern Western narrative of loss and time. But in her story Halima doesn’t appear to be yearning in vain for a displaced yesterday. To stay with Hartley’s words, in her story people don’t appear to do things differently in the past from the way they do them now.

The ‘fantastic days’ that constitute Halima’s childhood memories are not just part of a remote and romanticised past. Instead, the stories of people, events and places she grew up with have become engraved in her deepest self and turned into means of ordering and making sense of the ever-changing present. When Halima and her sister Sahra observe their children at the end of her story, they feel the past almost physically present. “Halima, does this remind you of your past?” Sahra asks; Halima affirms – yes, she remembers. And it is through this shared memory that the lost place of their childhood home in Mogadishu can be re-emplaced *here, now*, in Melbourne, and with (and perhaps through) their own children. Despite the painful displacement from the intimate places where her childhood memories are located, the act of remembering embeds the far away *there* in the *here* and *now*. Halima’s memory of the past, it seems, is the old acquaintance that helps guide her through foreign countries – and in doing so turns foreignness into something familiar and inhabitable. “We need the past, in any case”, writes David Lowenthal (1975: 5), “to cope with present landscapes.”

Celia McMichael has highlighted the positive effects of idyllic memories in her research on Somali women in Melbourne. Her PhD and publications are among the most substantial and in-depth accounts of ethnographic research on Somalis in Melbourne (McMichael, 2002, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c). In her thesis, which focused on Somali women in Melbourne and their concepts of emotional wellbeing, she found that the

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22 While there has been a considerable number of publications focusing on Somalis in the context of (mental and physical) health, ethnographic research on the community’s social life in Melbourne remains fairly small (see: A. Ahmed 2004; Omar 2009, 2011; Spaaj 2011; Ramsden & Taket 2011; Ramsden & Ridge 2012).
women’s idyllic memories of life in Somalia were intimately linked to everyday life in Melbourne. Some of her findings bear a clear resemblance to my reading of Halima’s memories of the past as constitutive for her present emplacement. McMichael points out that while many of the Somali women she worked with over the course of her research expressed the longing for an idyllic past, this wasn’t an experience that was dissociated from the present. Instead, their interpretation of the past as “golden” was a way for them to deal with a disrupted and difficult present (McMichael 2003a: 97).

As in Halima’s story, McMichael found that most of the narratives she encountered in her research lacked detailed recollections of the landscape or other physical features of home-places. This haziness was counter balanced, however, by their recollections of social worlds. The women described a sense of unity and shared identity when they spoke about their past in Somalia. “Women articulated a strong social and moral order, stable values, and reliable inter-personal relationships.” (McMichael 2003a: 105)

Building on a concept coined by Avtar Brah in Cartographies of Diaspora, McMichael describes Somali women in Melbourne as building their nostalgic memories of a past Somalia on the “lived experience of locality” (see Brah 1996: 188-189). These memories are storied as “tastes and sounds; the long hot days and beautiful beaches; the towns and cities where everyone shared the same language and religion; the ethic of sharing and reciprocity that was universally understood” (McMichael 2003a: 109). Close to Farah’s imaginative country, she sees these recollections of home in Somalia in terms of creating a mythic place of desire, or, in Brah’s (1996: 188) words again, as a “diasporic imagination”. Nostalgic memories thus function as an ideal moral guideline for the resettlement process in Melbourne.

While I agree with McMichael and Brah that imagination and storying play a crucial role in the relocation of the lived experience of place from there to here, Halima’s story doesn’t suggest that Somalia is a mythic place of desire and imagination. For her, it feels as something real and here, as something present and absent at the same time. Through the interplay of memory, place and story, the memory place of her childhood Somalia leaks into the present and becomes constitutive of the possibility of becoming-at-home in Melbourne. The idea that narrating nostalgic memories can be seen as a way forward, as a means of reading past events in the light of a present environment, was
also proposed by a recent study of Somalis in Melbourne conducted by Robyn Ramsden and Damien Ridge. They argue that their participants drew strength from constructing their homeland “as a safe, collective culture that transcends time and space” (Ramsden and Ridge 2012: 15). Very similar to my reading of Halima storying her ‘fantastic days’ in past Mogadishu, Ramsden and Ridge suggest that telling stories of idyllic, past social landscapes should be seen as a means of actively coping with migration and settlement in a new country.

If we think of home in terms of the act of inhabiting a place, the closeness of inhabiting to the word habit might not be coincidental. It is through habits, through repeated practices so close to our inner workings that they become almost one with place, that inhabiting becomes possible. In Halima’s story two elements are quintessential to the carving out of the habits that lead towards the feeling of being-at-home in a place – faith and the family. Both elements are of such importance that they weave their way through Halima’s entire life story. For their close links to the interplay of storytelling, memory and place, and for their strong presence in Halima’s childhood story, I now have a closer look at these two key elements.

**Under the Panoply of the Stars**

Nothing can create as deep an understanding for the immensity of the universe, and for the miniature of our own place within it, as looking up to a starlit sky. It is against this felt infinity of the universe that the intimacy of our place in the world begins to take shape.

I vividly remember walking home after school through the fields on cold winter-afternoons, when, by the time the school bus had arrived, it was already entirely dark. After my father had been forced to sell his childhood home in Millstatt, we had moved into a house in one of the nearby mountain villages, and the bus stop was a good twenty-minute walk away. Except for the icy snow crunching under my feet, the rattling of the milking machine or the mooing of a cow from a distant stable every now and then, there was an all-encompassing silence. Nature’s winter-sleep was all around me. On clear nights, the darkness of this winterland made the stars shine so bright, made
them sparkle so splendidly, that I was overwhelmed by a feeling of immensity and pure, unspeakable beauty. If all these far-away stars were part of something as unimaginably boundless as the universe, then how miniscule did they render me and my everyday worries, walking in that snowfield, located on a planet so tiny and insignificant?

Sometimes I stopped and tried to identify the constellations my father so often pointed out to us kids from the balcony on nights like these. I looked for the sharpest one of them all, the polar star, and from there I followed along the imaginary axis to the Little and the Great Bear and further along the Milky Way to the majestical Cassiopeia. By identifying the stars, by giving them names and stories, the immensity of the universe and my own insignificance within it seemed less intimidating. By telling a story about them, every planet, every star, every stone, house or country and every living being received its own place within the universe of my imagination.

At another time and from another corner of the earth, Halima, lying on a mat, facing the starlit sky, listened to her father’s stories of their creation. His were stories of the beauty and ability of Allah, who first created everything and then put it into its proper place within the universe. While the stories taught Halima to be humbled by the magnificence of this creation, she also began to understand how everything had its own story, its own reason for being-in-the-world and how, in the end, everything was linked through Allah. Against the ordering line of a story’s plot, the immensity of the universe transforms into something more understandable and close, into something of direct importance to our own lives.

The storying of the boundlessness of the cosmos into something intimate can be found all over the world. Indigenous researcher Dawn Bessarab was raised with a multitude of stories about the way the Australian landscape and its specific features were created in the Dreaming. Her mother’s stories about the night sky form the strongest of her childhood memories. “I grew up hearing from my mother about the constellation known as the Seven Sisters, and at night, when the sky was clear and lit with a multitude of stars, she would point them out to me and my siblings, telling us how the sisters got to be in the sky.” Bessarab describes how, in her mother’s stories, the Seven Sisters weren’t just a collection of stars in the sky; they were so deeply connected to life on earth that they took on human characteristics: “What made this creation story more real
for me was that on extremely cold winter nights, when the dew lay heavy on the land and dripped off the roof like rain, my mother would say, ‘Them old people in the Pilbara, they would tell us: ‘It’s those Seven Sisters, they weeing on us tonight.’” (Bessarab 2008: 54)

Halima, listening to her father’s creation stories under starlit skies, Dawn Bessarab, imagining the stars to have human characteristics, and my own search for the constellations my father had taught me, once more draw attention to the close links between place and storytelling. In And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos, John Berger writes of the relentless power of the story in making sense of the unimaginable immensity of the universe.

Lying on our backs, we look up at the night sky. This is where stories began, under the aegis of that multitude of stars which at night filch certitudes and sometimes return them as faith. Those who first invented and then named the constellations were storytellers. Tracing an imaginary line between a cluster of stars gave them an image and an identity. The stars threaded on that line were like events threaded on a narrative. Imagining the constellations did not of course change the stars, nor did it change the black emptiness that surrounds them. What it changed was the way people read the night sky. (Berger 1984: 8)

Under the protective panoply of the stars, Halima learned how to read the sky, and how Allah, who had created them all so splendidly, had also created her. Through her father’s stories, Halima’s emplacement is thus not within an isolated, immovable or eternal home-place. Rather, it is a sense of being-at-home within Allah’s universe, where everything and everyone has been created for a reason, and where everything links back to Allah, who has the power to call in and out of life. And because God created everything and is everywhere, being-at-home in faith opens up the possibility to a feeling of being-part-of the universe and to carrying this feeling with her everywhere she goes.

Halima’s becoming-at-home within Allah’s universe through her father’s stories is a way of being-at-home in a place that appears to be stabilised and centred and still reaches out to the wider world. It is a way of being-at-home that centres her within the protective grid of the family, but also under the all-encompassing reach of God. Close
to Rilke’s world inner space, it is a form of emplacement that allows her to be inward and outward-bound at the same time. Halima’s being-at-home in the universe thus once more reveals the closeness between intimacy and vastness – between the deep attachment to certain places and the insignificance of these places against the vastness of the universe – a vastness we, in turn, story back to something placeable and dear.

This condition bears many resemblances to what Michael Jackson describes as being “at home in the world”. In his book of that title, he embarks upon a journey to find the meaning of home in our restless age of continuous movement. He approaches this search from the perspective of people for whom dwelling is not synonymous with being settled in a house. Over a period of three years he lives among the nomadic Warlpiri in Central Australia’s Tanami Desert. The experience of living in the desert and observing the way his Warlpiri friends place themselves in the world enables Jackson to come to a new understanding of home and belonging. It is an understanding of being-at-home that is deeply attached to place but doesn’t require the claustrophobic privacy of the modern house or the narrow-mindedness of the nationalistic imagination of the nation state. Camping in the desert with a few of his Warlpiri friends, surrounded by nothing but the endlessness of the desert, Jackson describes a moment when he felt deeply what it means to be at home in the world:

I was drifting into a kind of reverie when Zack startled me, pointing skyward. A jet was crossing the sky, 35,000 feet above us. Sunlight glinted on a wing. The drone of its engines was barely audible.

“Going to Europe,” Zack said, “Singapore.”

Then, it was as though some weight shifted inside me. I felt an all-encompassing calm. A window flung open onto a field of light. I had not the slightest desire to be on my way to Europe, or to be anywhere else. I had come to the place I had always wanted to come.

At that moment, sitting there with Zack and Nugget, Pincher and Francine, I think I knew what it means to be at home in the world. It is to experience a complete consonance between one’s own body and the body of the earth. Between self and other. It little matters whether the other is a landscape, a loved one, a house, or an action. Things flow. There seems to be no resistance between oneself and the world. The relationship is all. (Jackson 1995: 110-111)
Moments of lived intimacy, of being-at-home in the world, when things flow and self and other become one, do not necessarily always need an exact physical location. Jackson argues that these experiences can be placed in a locale, like a house or a landscape, but that they can also be located in people or actions. Just like Halima emplacing herself under the panoply of the stars, it suggests a wider understanding of place, one that allows place to not freeze within itself but to touch and reach out to the wider world – if not to the entire universe.

People as Places

When I am trying to describe the place I come from to my Australian friends, I often find myself talking about people. Like Halima in her story, I wouldn’t speak of the landscape, the lakes, rivers, plants or trees that have written themselves so deeply into my innermost feeling. Instead, I find myself speaking of my family, my neighbours, my friends, my enemies – in short, of the characteristics of the people whom I shared the place with. And although deep inside myself I know the way certain places feel, sound, or taste, it is incredibly hard to speak of it to people here, so far away from the places I left behind. For that reason, I usually don’t speak of the feeling of the water on my skin when swimming in the lake in Millstatt on a warm summer night, or of the soothing warmth derived from looking at the soft, white, round tops of the Nockberge mountain range in winter. And yet, when I am thinking of all the people who make up the places of my stories, it is as if people and places merge into each other. Sometimes, places and people become so one that it is as if people themselves become places.

When Halima speaks of her childhood in Somalia, some physical features of certain places find their way into the story, like their house in Mogadishu – a house they built with their own hands – or the beauty of the ocean they walked to every Friday. But these features seem to be no more than arenas for a much stronger force of emplacement: the family. The house is primarily storied as a means to order and keep the family together, and the ocean as a place for the family to have a joyful time. Whilst at home in Allah’s universe, the family forms the centre of that very universe. The family is of such importance that home, place, and family seem to almost become one.
Consider, for example, the story of her father’s second-born son who grew up with his grandparents in the countryside. Halima’s father, who was born in the rural coastal area of Xaafun, became the first person in his family to begin working for the newly founded Somali nation. He was so tall and strong, Halima once told me, that his father, a trader, thought he would make a good policeman. So he took him to town and presented him to the police officer. The officer agreed that Halima’s father was of an imposing physique and that he could become a good policeman. And thus, Halima’s father was sent to school and went on to join the police force.

While the position of the police officer was highly respectable, it also brought with it the necessity for Halima’s father to leave his family and to move to other places within Somalia. In her story Halima tells us how he leaves his second born son with his mother, who needed someone to replace her absent son, “someone for the heart”, as a means of retaining the ties to his ancestral home. This boy forms a human bridge to overcome the spatial gap between the rest of his family, who live in the far away south of the country, and the grandparents who remain in the place where their clans’ history is rooted. He literally re-places his father and forms the human tie to keep the connection between the home-place and the people who inhabit it, alive. When the boy joins the rest of the family in Mogadishu after their mother’s death, he appears to have become so one with the place he grew up, that the new environment he finds himself in alienates him to such a degree that he has difficulties to get used to it.

The importance of place for the constitution of people also becomes apparent when Halima’s father refuses to take on a job in Hargeisa in Somaliland. It is not just the distance that makes him refuse to go there and give up his position, it is the fact that his children are still small and that they need to be surrounded by an “area that they can understand”. An area they understand, it seems, is an area where the meaning of its inner working is shared by others – and not by any others, but by others who are close to the family’s heart.

Keith Basso’s book *Wisdom Sits in Places* is one of the most powerful ethnographic contributions towards the revalidation of place in anthropology. Looking at the way four Western Apaches story their experience of place and landscape, he suggests that people shape places, but that people are also shaped by places. Although this sense of place is
of such quintessential importance, it is a process that is usually so deeply rooted within our unconscious that we aren’t aware of it. It is only when we are (like Halima’s brother, for example) removed from the environment we have become so familiar with, that our attachment to place is exposed. Basso (1996: xiii-xiv) writes: “On these unnerving occasions, sense of place may assert itself in pressing and powerful ways, and its often subtle components – as subtle, perhaps, as absent smells in the air or not enough visible sky – come surging into awareness. It is then we come to see that attachments to places may be nothing less than profound, and that when these attachments are threatened, we may feel threatened as well.”

When Halima speaks of the protective bond of the family, of her father’s guidance, or of the love and care of her sisters Sahra and Zeinab, a sense of place finds its way into the story. Again, it is as if these people become places themselves. In her beautifully written book Weaving a Way Home Leslie Van Gelder (2008) sets out in search for what she calls the “multilayered landscape of place”. Following her family history and her personal history of attachment to places, she unravels place as the structure of the world and as the seat of the self.

Van Gelder (2008: 85) suggests that we can only understand places through webs of relationships, and through looking into the emotional connections we create with them. “In the home environment, like no other place, person and place merge”, she writes. “We are both of a people and from them. Impossible to separate, we dwell in each other.” This being of and from, or, in Merleau-Ponty’s words again, being “born of and into the world”, is quintessential to an understanding of the way people constitute their places and are at the same time constituted by them. In Halima’s story, being from and of a place is equivalent to being of and from a certain people. In her story, place is thus so closely linked to the people who make it meaningful, that it is hard to separate family and place. It is, in other words, as if Halima’s feeling of being-at-home derives from a place that is located within other humans – her family.

Van Gelder speaks of a “sensuous landscape of home”, a feeling of home we learn from the people closest to us from the day we were created. This oneness of place and people can be traced far back to the time when we, as unborn babies, were literally at home within another person – our mother’s womb: “The newborn already knows the familiar
heartbeat it once heard like regularly chiming cathedral bells from the inside, now muffled on the outside. The same voices fill the air with vibration. This is the familiar and the familiar in the body of home. Family.” (Van Gelder 2008: 87)

It is impossible to separate our sense of home from the sense of family because they were one from the very beginning of our self. Like double-woven baskets, people are both – inner and outer, they are of and in at the same time. “Like places we visit over and over again,” Van Gelder (2008: 88) writes, “we ourselves are storied landscapes, where each scar holds a story and each moment hangs pregnant with possibility.” The feeling of being-at-home has a strong connection to the way we are recognised. For Van Gelder the feeling of being-at-home can only develop in a place where our voices are heard. If we aren’t heard, we can feel as if we don’t exist (Van Gelder 2008: 92). Storytelling and place are therefore intimately linked through the meaning of creating an environment where one’s voice is recognised. Without an audience and without a place to tell the stories, people can begin to feel a deep sense of loneliness.

Not every family holds the ideal balance between openness and protection that is required for dwelling. Halima ends her story with a deeply felt sadness over the disruption in the lives of many young Somalis, who, growing up in fear and violence, never received this nurturing feeling of being-at-home within others. Not having this kind of home, Halima explains, means being lost and deeply and utterly homeless. The destruction of the family is thus inextricably linked to the destruction of the country – and with it of her childhood Mogadishu.
2.

THE POETICS OF SOMALI WOMANHOOD

Becoming a Daughter and Sister

Soon after I had met Halima for the first time, I became a frequent guest in her house in Maidstone in Melbourne’s western suburbs. While painting the container, she had told me that writing assignments in English was at times very challenging and that Sagal often had to help her. Sagal, however, who studied medical sciences, also had much learning to do, which made exam periods extremely stressful times for both of them. Before I left that day, I suggested to Halima that I could assist her with her next assignments, which were due soon. “That way you help me with my studies and I help you with yours,” I said. Halima laughed. “That’s a good deal,” she agreed. This ‘deal’ proved to not just be enriching for both our learning processes; working together and getting to know each other’s routines and interests also laid the ground for our friendship.

Only a short while after we had first met, Halima called me for help with an assignment on research methodologies. “You can come over here and we work for a little, and then I will make sure that you get enough to eat,” Halima said. She joked that, as my parents were so far away, she had to make sure that I was well-fed and not leading a sloppy student lifestyle.

And thus, on an intensely hot Saturday afternoon in February, when the sun’s strength was so overpowering that everything appeared to be dressed in a transparent white coat, I cycled my way through the parklands on the northern side of Melbourne. From there I went across the Maribyrnong River, the natural border that seems to draw a sharp line between the luxuries and social order of the inner city and the forgotten outskirts in the West, which are so close to the city’s centre and yet appear to be so far away from it. Leaving behind the colourful and lively heart of the West, Footscray, where Vietnamese grocery stores and Pho-soup bars are lined side by side with Ethiopian eateries and Pakistani spice-shops, I cycled through kilometres of suburban streets until I arrived in
Halima’s street. I found her house nestled between an old milk-bar corner-shop that looked like it had long closed its doors and a row of nineteen-sixties-style brick houses that are so typical in suburban Melbourne – complete with small front gardens and large windows that open towards the living rooms, but with the thick curtains or blinds always closed, leaving the passer-by deeply and utterly *outside*.

From the very first time I took off my shoes and entered Halima’s house, I felt comfortable. The small, three-bedroom house was filled with life. Her daughters Sahra and Sagal were busy in the kitchen, chatting and laughing. As I arrived, Halima’s son Said, just back from his factory job in Brunswick, was retreating into his bedroom to have a rest. Except for Halima’s husband Mohamed, who had gone, as he does every day, to Sunshine to help out as an accountant with a Somali money transfer business, all were at home. The television, ignored by everyone in the room, was blaring to itself at full blast, while Halima was sitting next to it, patiently working on her assignment. Thrown into the midst of all this joyful chaos, I felt reminded of my own family, of the muddled disorder of eight people trying to comment on a story at the same time, leaving visitors amused or puzzled – or both.

“Sagal, Sahra, look who is here!” Halima announced, and directed me to a seat while ordering her daughters to bring me something to drink. “Come on, take off these clothes,” Sagal laughed, eyeing the cardigan and scarf I had put on upon arrival, eager not to offend anyone by keeping my arms uncovered. “Look, we’re all dressed lightly. It’s only us girls here today, and it’s hot!” The moment I sat down with them for the first time, I began growing towards these three women who made me feel so at home. Before they first spelled it out to me, I could sense the deep bond that existed between Halima and her daughters. And listening to their stories and to the constant jokes thrown back and forth, I could also sense that, far from confirming the stereotype of Somali women being subservient, silenced by or dependent on their husbands, the three of them knew very well how to stand up for themselves. Later that afternoon Halima told me that educating and empowering her three daughters had always been her strongest priority. Even under the most difficult circumstances, suddenly on her own with five kids, deeply shaken by the war they just had escaped, without money and without the prospect of receiving a visa to legalise their stay in the United Arab Emirates, she had
somehow managed to send her children to school. “Yes, I lost everything I ever had,” she said, “but I couldn’t just give up. I needed to go on for my kids.” Listening to Halima’s story, Sagal commented: “It is only now that I understand what my mother has done for us. When we were children we took our mum’s strength for granted; we were never fearful of our future, because she carried us through these times.” “So what do you think of it now that you are all in your mid or late-twenties?” I asked. “I am amazed,” Sagal replied. “How did she do it?”

Between all the stories, the cups of sweet Somali tea and the plates of food we shared, Halima and I also discussed the differences between qualitative and quantitative research methodologies she had to write about for her assignment. It was through my own project that we came to talk about the meaning of participant observation. I told her that in anthropology, the act of sharing people’s everyday life, of becoming acquainted with their daily routines and struggles, is the most important research tool. I explained that the life stories in my thesis could only come to life if I got glimpses into the everyday lives of the people who shared them with me. Immediately Halima acknowledged the role she could play by letting me take part in her own life. “You’re right,” she said. “You need to come with me and see my community’s life so you can observe and learn to understand.”

By the end of the day, Halima had formulated very clearly defined distinctions between the different research methods commonly used in social work. At the same time, my own reasons for choosing to focus on life stories had also become much clearer to her. “Whatever it takes to write this thesis, I will support you,” Halima said. I felt relieved that in this roundabout way, we had been able to discuss and come to terms with the politics of research methodology. Instead of keeping us apart, it had become a common ground for us in our shared interest in humans and their social lives.

Within a short time, after only a few more visits, I was given my own place within Halima’s home. It was then that she told me that I was part of her family now. “You remind me of my daughter who lives in America so far away from us,” she said. “And because your own family is so far away too, we will be your Australian family.” Becoming Halima’s daughter and Sahra and Sagal’s sister felt like becoming part of something meaningful and dear to my own life. As is usual amongst all people who
share webs of deep meaning, we constantly told each other stories of our lives. But while getting to know each other so closely made Halima’s stories flow with lightness, it also gave me an understanding for the stories that were shared with me as a friend and couldn’t otherwise be retold.

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I still remember the revolution in Somalia. I was fifteen or sixteen years old. At first it was very hard for us as a family, because the president whom they killed before Siyaad Barre came to power was from our tribe. So it was hard for the people who came from that background. But what was different for us was that we didn’t grow up with my father’s family. I grew up in a different area and my father was a policeman, so we were sympathetic with the military taking over. When they killed the president we said: “Nothing remains, so what are we waiting for? Just let the revolution happen.” So what we started to do was helping that to happen.

After the revolution in 1969, I became a youth activist. I was the first one in my family to get involved, and after that my sister Sahra, my brother, and two other sisters joined. In 1976 the Somali Socialist Party was created and we became members. My brother Said became a governor at one stage. My sister Sahra finished her nursing school and she became responsible for the district pharmacy.

I was very young at that time, but they sent me to Russia. From every school they chose one person to study in Russia, and when they came to my school they assessed me and asked whether I would like to go. To go outside, to go overseas, that was something big for me, so I said: “Yes!”

23 Halima is referring to the military coup d’etat on 15 October 1969, when president Cabdul-Rasheed Cali Sharmarke was killed. Six days later, members of the Somali military and police forces, led by general Siyaad Barre called out the end of the civilian regime and the rise of a revolutionary order (A.I. Samatar 1988).
I went to the High Komsomol School\textsuperscript{24} in Moscow. There were people from all over the world in that school. In that year more than three thousand students came from different countries. I studied political economy, philosophy and international communist movement. What I learned in Moscow is still guiding me in my studies in community development now.

I was worrying a lot. I was a little, beautiful kid and before I left Somalia my father had advised me not to mix with the wrong people. When I left, he said: “I know my kids, I trust them.” I got that message in my mind, and while I was in Moscow it always guided me. My friends were from the school group, and from outside I wouldn’t speak to anyone.

I met my husband in Moscow. He was in the Trade Union School. When they took him there he was a worker, while I was a student. He was working for the Somali Airlines. He used to be in the ticketing department and they promoted him as an accountant. Later they promoted him as a catering manager.

Both of us finished our course, and then he asked me to talk to him. But I said: “No. I’m not ready to talk to you!” Then he tried something else and invited the whole group of Somali students to their place so that I would go there as well. One of his friends, who became a member of the parliament with me, and who is living here in Melbourne now as well, was responsible for that gathering. He invited all of us, because if he invited only me he knew that I would have never gone there. So they invited the whole group and I went.

When he left Russia, my husband straight away went to the airport in Somalia to where my father was working. He said: “I have information about your daughter.” And my father hugged him and said: “You have to come to see my family and tell how you saw my daughter!” My husband was very clever! So then he went to see the family, and they loved him. He said: “You have a very clever girl, she’s very tough, she never talks to men, and she’s very active in her study.” My father said: “Really?” And he said: “Yes”. And they invited him again and again and again.

\textsuperscript{24} The Higher Komsomol School was a cadre training unit by the youth division of the Soviet Communist Party.
He arrived seven days before me and in these seven days, they invited him three times. They already saw that he was a good man and that he had a very good job. When I arrived, all the other people had to wait outside, but he brought my father in front of the plane, waiting there. When I arrived I said: “Hey, you know each other?” My father said: “This is a very beautiful man! He’s good!” The next day my husband came and said: “I wanted to ask your father for your hand. Do you accept?” I said: “No. I don’t know you. I have to know you before.” So we were together for three years before we married. I married when I was nineteen.

But first I finished my school, because I hadn’t finished it when I left. Then I studied political science. I also proceeded with my work with the youth; we created the Somali Youth Union. In that era there were lots of other activities, like the Women’s Workers Union, but I always stuck with the youth because I believe that youth is the main future of the country.

When I had finished my education, we got our own home, we married and after one year I got my daughter Sahra. My first child was born in 1979, my second child was born in 1980. It was very close. First two girls and the third one was a boy, and the forth was a girl again. They were all born in Mogadishu, the capital city.

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Like a Stick Burning from Two Sides

From the very first moment I met Halima, I was struck by her inner strength. Her presence, her way of walking through this world, her readiness to take on any hurdle, created in me an impression of her as an invulnerable bastion of calm. And my image of Halima was also the way she liked to see herself. “I think I’m pretty strong,” she said. “But you know, being a female politician in Somalia has taught me so.” The years she had worked as a member of parliament under Siyaad Barre while raising her children, and the struggles she went through to find acceptance, had helped her to develop a strong sense of independence. “All people were criticizing me: ‘Why are you doing
Halima said. “But I never gave up doing things, because what my father taught me was that I could do what every other person could do: If men can do it, you can do it as well.”

While she was telling me this, we were walking through the ‘Somali mall’, the remnants of an old shopping mall in Footscray, a place that ever since its closure has been taken over by Somali shop owners. The tiny shop rooms are filled with rugs, teapots, pans, spices, Arabic perfumes and fashionable scarves. There are also hairdressers, dress makers, international call shops and xawilaad businesses to send money overseas. Unlike in the shiny new big mall that has been built a few blocks away, in the Somali mall people don’t seem to rush through like ghosts. They stroll through in a slow pace, stopping every now and then to greet someone. The shops are filled with men and women, sitting on plastic chairs and sharing cups of tea or coffee. Snippets of laughter and conversation echo through the old, bleak building. An island apart from the buzz of Footscray, the mall feels like a calm street somewhere in a small town, where everyone knows everyone. It is this feeling of familiarity, of being surrounded by the melody of the Somali language, of smelling the cardamom scent of her Mogadishu home, of being known by others, that draws Halima to the mall.

That day, however, Halima had come on a mission. She wanted to show me how her own strength was mirrored by the strength of countless other Somali women who were the owners of shops in the Somali mall. She was worried by the way the Australian public perceived the women of her community. “The only thing they see is our headscarf,” she said. “As if the scarf turns us into ghosts. But what’s behind it? Us, me.”

The Somalia in which she had grown up and where, as her story shows, she became part of the revolutionary new order, was very liberal. While a small urban minority of middle or upper class Somalis practiced the seclusion of women, the majority worked inside and outside the house (Abdi 2007: 187). It was only in the 1980s, when the Muslim Brotherhood began to penetrate Somalia’s urban centres, that a small number of Somali women first began wearing the full chador with face covering. But, as Cawo Abdi shows in her research on Somali women, with the outbreak of the civil war in Somalia, many Somalis turned towards the certainties that the rules of an imagined “pure” Islamic community could offer. As part of this shift, “authentic” Islam came to
be inscribed on women’s bodies. This led not only to new dress habits for Somali women, but to what Abdi (2007: 193) calls a “newly imagined Somali woman”.

While many scholars have commented on the fact that this new conservatism has crossed the bridge from war-torn Somalia into the diaspora (Berns-McGown 1999; De Voe 2002; Tiilikainen 2003; Bryden 2003; Abdi 2007; Valentine et al. 2009), Halima found that the religious imagination didn’t have the power to overrule the lived reality of Somali refugees’ everyday lives. Although many of the women she was working with were following this conservative trend, a large proportion of them were, in fact, the main breadwinners. This new situation, Halima said, where men had to rely on their wives to feed the family, had changed the dynamics within many families. “Before, the woman was just called by her husband: ‘Hey, woman, do this or do that!’” Halima explained. “But now she is ‘darling’, because she has money in her pocket.”

We went from shop to shop, where women, old and young, welcomed us. “This is my friend Annika,” Halima told the tradeswomen and curious onlookers. “She came all the way from Austria to write a PhD about us.” Many women laughed in astonishment. Who would come that far to write about them? In one of the shops, however, a group of outspoken young women who were sitting on a pile of rugs, sharing a cup of Somali tea, thought otherwise. “Someone should write about Halima anyway,” one of them said. “Yes,” another girl with a broad Australian accent agreed. “You found the right topic. Auntie Halima is awesome.” She told me how Halima helped young mothers like her to feel strong, to leave the house, to join her in one of her sewing groups and by doing so to break through their isolation. Halima’s strength, I thought to myself, was thus so all-encompassing that despite all the struggles she had to go through in her own life, she still had enough left to share it with others – and even with me.

It was during her work in politics, she told me, that she had learned to be so strong. And, as her story of growing into adulthood during a time of revolutionary changes shows, it involved much bargaining, savvy and determination to find acceptance in a world that was dominated by men. “Sometimes it was so tiring, I felt constantly exhausted,” she said. Especially towards the end of Barre’s regime her position became complicated. Not only did she have to struggle for acceptance as a woman, but the regime had begun to turn against dissident clans. “My position became harder and
harder,” Halima explained. On the one side, she was from the Majerteen, a clan that slowly fell out of favour with Barre’s ruling clan, the Mareexaan. This brought a large portion of distrust from other MPs and officials. On the other side, her own family sometimes turned against her for working with the regime. “In Somalia there is a proverb that describes how I felt in that situation: We say it is like a stick that starts burning from both sides,” she said. “So I felt like the stick that was being eaten up from both sides.”

And yet, despite all these pressures, despite the growing dangers and despite the endless struggles that fatigued her so deeply, Halima said that she never contemplated giving up her position. “How could you find the strength to go on under these circumstances?” I asked, thinking about the terrible last years of the regime when the country slowly began to dissolve. “I always wanted to work for the community,” she said, “and I believed that it was easier to do that from within the regime than from without.” Halima tried to stay in her position to help save as many of her people as possible. “If I had left, they would have killed me too,” she said. “By staying I could actually try and help my people from within the system.” It was the hope embodied in her socialist ideals as well as the possibility of actively working for change from within that helped Halima bear up against the odds. Having become close to Halima now, many years later and far away from the glamorous context of a political career, I see the same hopeful determination mirrored in her work with the Somali community in Melbourne. It is a determination that has survived years of war and insecurity, and it is a determination she now uses to help build up her community.

This strength and hopefulness, this urge to act and resist disempowering situations, speak through many of Halima’s stories. This strength also comes to the fore in her account of growing up and of her marriage in a revolutionary Somalia. In her account, the ground-breaking events of the military coup and the society’s shift to a radically new order are closely interwoven with ground-breaking events in her own life. In a poetic way, the major personal changes of growing up, of developing her own ideas and of establishing her own family become inseparably linked to the surrounding political changes. On yet another level, the strength in Halima’s story also gives an insight into women’s complex involvement in Somali politics and society. It is in the light of the
complex struggle between tradition and change, between the imagined and the lived, that I have come to read Halima’s story.

Poetesses and Freedom Fighters

In the heart of Mogadishu, close to the popular monument of Sayid Maxamed Cabdille Xasan (‘the Mad Mullah’), Somalia’s most prominent national hero, there stands a concrete figure, a woman in a flowing dress, firmly holding a sword and a stone in her hands. It is a statue of Xaawo Cusmaan Taako, whose story has inscribed itself into the historical consciousness of many Somalis (Aidid 2011: 103). She was killed during an anti-colonial protest of the Somali Youth League in 1948, which was violently disrupted by pro-Italian groups the colonial power had organised against them. Like many other Somali women, she had been actively involved in the anti-colonial struggle, and had ultimately given her life for it.

I first heard of Xaawo’s extraordinary story when Sagal posted a photo of the heroine’s statue on her Facebook-page, urging all Somalis not to forget about the contribution of women like Xaawo to their country’s history. After all the stories I had come across of great warriors, versatile poets and spirited freedom fighters, all of whom were male, it was the first time I had heard of the public celebration of a Somali woman. In most of the ethnographic and historical accounts I had read of Somalia, women were either described as the weakest links within the social hierarchy or didn’t appear as voices in their own right at all. This portrayal, however, didn’t mirror Halima, her daughters, or, in fact, any of the Somali women I met over the last few years. Beyond the public Western imagination of Somali women as hidden behind their veiled, Muslim identities and as oppressed and silenced victims of a misogynistic culture, I found their strength and self-assertion striking. Many of the women I met in Melbourne had become the main breadwinners, and even those who weren’t were far from silently obeying their husbands. Just as Xaawo’s contribution to the country’s struggle for independence speaks for a role of Somali women that goes beyond their restriction to the household, so does Halima’s story, a story that tells of the interplay between tradition and the renegotiation of women’s and men’s roles in Somali society.
That stories of women like Xaawo Taako are usually missing in historical or ethnographic discourses on Somalia, or that veiled and religious women like Halima and her daughters often seem to almost surprise Western feminists with their power and determination, has much to do with the way the Western imagination of Somali women has been coined. Historian Christine Choi Ahmed’s essay on the representation of Somali women forms the first and most powerful critical evaluation of the discursive production of stereotypical and essentialised views of Somali women (Ahmed 1995). Ahmed specifically criticises I.M. Lewis for his orientalist imagination of Somali women. In his work, the anthropologist creates a picture whereby Somali men represent the noble part of society, while women are likened to a person without any rights. In Blood and Bone, for example, he writes that women are expected to always obey, honour, and respect their husbands or fathers (Lewis 1994: 56). He stresses that Somali women have a subordinate status and that their main task is to “provide for her husband’s sexual needs, bear children, especially sons, and care properly for these, as well as adequately performing her herding tasks” (Lewis 1994: 57). In describing women in such generalised and static terms, without giving much space for movement and change (or indeed their own voice) Lewis has shaped the myth of the Somali woman as a chattel, a commodity, and as a creature with little power (Ahmed 1995: 159-164).

Ahmed argues that Lewis, who spent years amongst northern Somali nomads, didn’t see the obvious contradictions to his patriarchal portrayal of Somali women in the daily lives of the people he was living with. Where Lewis (1994: 57-58) claims that women’s subservient position is linked to the fact that they do not own anything and are always dependent on their husbands, Ahmed (1995: 163) argues that almost all Somali women gathered their own wealth through the jewellery they collected, sometimes over generations. Women often received a great deal of their wealth at their weddings, and jewellery formed an essential part of their assets. Because of its influence on the writing of Somali history and ethnography, Ahmed suggests that contemporary literature on Somalia needs to be entirely freed from the canon of Lewis so that we can begin to evaluate the historical data afresh. She stresses that it is evident that if women are not even interviewed, let alone being considered as a part of history, they will be absent from most accounts.
Listening to my accounts of the way women were emplaced in classical ethnographies and histories of Somalia, and to Lewis’ description of women as creatures with little power, Halima laughed. While she acknowledged that women were structurally disadvantaged, she didn’t agree with the picture of them silently obeying these circumstances. “In my family, the women have always been the stronger ones,” Halima said. “And I’m not just talking about myself, my sisters, my daughters. I am talking about generations back.” And then she told me the story of her great-grandmother, a woman who lived in the Puntland area during the times the poet, mystic and warrior Sayid Maxamed Cabdille Xassan led a war against British, Italian and Ethiopian forces and almost brought them to a standstill. During this anti-colonial struggle, which took place between 1900 and 1920, many men from the Darood clans became warriors.

It was during these times, Halima said, that her great-grandmother, who was known for her courage and outspokenness, supported Sayid’s cause by feeding the warriors that were in her area. But the fighting, the killing and the violence had changed some of these freedom fighters. Sometimes they would come into the village and mistreat the women, laugh at them and create mayhem. Halima’s great-grandmother watched the situation for a long time. But one day, when a group of warriors rode through the village on their horses, and, out of a pure desire to hurt someone, stole her pot, she decided that she needed to take drastic steps. She was furious, Halima told me. This was not just her only pot; it was also the pot she had used to support the very people who had treated her so disrespectfully. And so Halima’s great-grandmother travelled all the way to Sayid Maxamed Cabdille Xassan’s fort, where she demanded to see the leader so insistently that, in the end, she was let in. The story goes that she was so angry about the men’s disrespectful behaviour that Sayid had little chance to say anything for a long time. And then, when he could finally respond, he apologised to her. He said that he felt embarrassed about the way his warriors had treated her. And when she left, Halima told me, he showered her with praise – and with a new pot, a cooking pot made out of pure gold.

Rather than seeing herself and her fellow countrywomen as voiceless victims, Halima sees herself in the tradition of a larger history of female struggles. Far from being a powerless chattel, she found many ways to voice her opinions and thoughts. By actively engaging other Somali women to participate in her sewing groups, by organising
initiatives like the Peace Project, and by returning to university, she was anything but silent. Besides her activism, as I was to find out, she also voiced her thoughts through more creative forms of expression. In line with other Somali female poetesses, Halima expresses her hopes, sorrows and frustrations in poems.

Men dominate the higher forms of Somali poetry, the gabay. This is closely linked to the fact that the poet is often also a spokesperson for his group and acts within the public sphere, a role that is usually not seen as appropriate for women. But women developed their own poetic forms, the highest of it being the buraanbur. Some of the poems composed by women were traditionally sung to break the monotony of their work, but, as Dhabo Hasan, Amina Adan and Amina Warsame (1995: 175) argue, their more important function was to express daily problems, desires and aspirations, and also to protest against oppression and subjugation.

By focusing on poems, a number of fascinating oral history studies have revealed the hidden history of Somalia from women’s perspectives (Aden 1981; Jama 1991, 1994; Farah, Adan & Warsame 1995; Kapteijns 1999, 2009, 2011; Elmi, Ibrahim & Jenner 2000; Aidid 2011). They unfold another picture of Somali women, one that is much closer to my inner image of Halima. The poems bring women’s strong and critical views on their roles in society to the fore; they show them as active participants in political life, as savvy mediators and, just like Xaawo or Halima’s great-grandmother, as determined fighters against colonialism and injustice.

Consider, for example, a poem written by Hawa Jibril, who was actively involved in the fight for independence. When Somalia achieved independence in 1960, women like Hawa, who had committed themselves to the nationalist cause, suddenly found that they were left outside the very political institutions they had fought for. Far from silently accepting this act of disempowerment, the poem expresses the frustration and disappointment many women felt:

Sisters, we were forgotten!
We did not taste the fruit of our success
Even the lowest positions were not offered
And our degrees have been cast away like rubbish.
One summer-afternoon, on a day when Halima’s thoughts had wandered back to war-torn Somalia over and over again, she expressed her pain over all she had fought for and that seemed lost now by singing me her poem ‘Somalia Window of the World Weeyo’. This poem, which she had written years earlier, expressed her longing and hope for a better Somalia. Halima began composing poems after the outbreak of the war, mainly as a means of finding relief. The soothing rhythm of the song allowed her to travel to painful landscapes of her past, but also to a future Somalia, which her poems hope and call out for. Over the years, these poems have come to accompany her and form an essential part of her self-healing process. For their persuasiveness and poetic strength, her songs have also gained some popularity amongst her friends and in the wider Somali community. Thus, Halima is not just a gifted storyteller, but her stories can be linked to the wider tradition of the *buraanbur*.

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Somalia Window of the World Weeyo

Wareerka dhulkayga galay baan wadiiq u doonayaa
Waayeelkaan dumariikbaan walaalow oran hayaa
Wadaaka wanaagsan baan wariiksii tabinayaa
Dhalinta kala weecataan wanaaga u sheegayaa

I am trying to find a way out to save my country from the senseless confusion
I am inviting the elders, the women for advice
I am gathering the wise people
I am informing and guiding the fragmented youth

Wow, wow, wow, window of the world iyoo

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I am trying to find a way out to save my country from the senseless confusion
I am asking all to reunite and hold hands
I am advancing and highlighting the sound advice of the good preacher
I am rehabilitating the misguided and wrongly indoctrinated children

Wow, wow, wow, window of the world iyoo

I am trying to find a way out to save my country from the senseless confusion
We have vast land
Filled by mineral resources
And extraordinarily packed by all types of life stock

Wow, wow, wow, window of the world iyoo

Imagine and compare what we had and where we stand now
The country is destroyed and the intellectuals are massacred
All decent mothers and wives are widowed
Don’t mention our children – they are in the mercy of the merciless along the road

Wow, wow, wow, window of the world iyoo

Wareerka dhulkayga galay baan wadiiqo u doonayaa
Wanaaga intii rabtoo dunida wada saaranahy
Waxyeelada taala ciidda intii ku wareersaney
Wanaaga intaad duntaan xumaha wada daadisaan
Walaalooba oo wadaaga
Waddanku wadyiin deeqayaaye

I am trying to find a way out to save my country from the senseless confusion
Those who are with us in this universe and crave for peace
Those who are sick and tired from the chaos in our land
Advocate for the good and discard the evil
Unite as brothers and sisters
This country can accommodate all of us comfortably

Waa Window of the World Weeyo

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Storying Somali Womanhood

In many ways, Halima’s story of meeting her husband Mohamed can be read within the wider context of Somalia’s orature. The way she stories her stern determination to follow her father’s moral guidelines, and her refusal to give in to Mohamed’s courtship attempts, bears many resemblances to the portrayal of the ‘proper’, morally immaculate and obeying young girl that is often narrated in traditional Somali storytelling. Her descriptions of her father’s advice not to follow any men, of her refusal to speak to men

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26 The poem was translated into English by Omar with the assistance of Halima.
outside her class, and of her initial reluctance to get to know her husband, mirror the
ideal image of an unmarried Somali girl’s behaviour Lidwien Kapteijns has identified as
an essential trope of traditional pastoral literature.

In her book *Women’s Voices in a Man’s World*, Kapteijns evaluates the role of Somali
women by looking at both male and female oral poetry. She analyses poems that stand
for two distinct periods in Somali history: traditional orature from colonial northern
Somali pastoral society and popular songs that represent nationalist, urban and modern
changes. Kapteijns stresses that in many traditional stories, the relationship between the
unmarried girl and her father is crucial. The girl has to obey her father, and marrying
against his wish could provoke him to curse her (Kapteijns 1999: 31). In Halima’s story,
her father’s description of Mohamed as a “beautiful man” is crucial to her own decision
to let him into her life. Before she hasn’t returned back home and received her father’s
approval, she doesn’t even allow her future husband to exchange a word with her.
“Somali orature represents as proper girls those who were obedient, forebearing, and
sexually inexperienced and ignorant, but also resourceful and competent”, Kapteijns

At the same time as Halima’s story plays with images of a young girl’s traditional role,
it doesn’t resemble the traditional moral imagination of the Somali woman as *raalliyo*,
the ideal wife who always obeys her husband. Instead, Halima’s story gives a
fascinating insight into the shifting of traditional boundaries and the quick-witted
strategies she uses to circumnavigate limitations. In her account, old and new gender
perceptions seem to overlap and demand a place in her story all at once. While
following her father’s advice, she doesn’t want to marry too early and thereby risk
losing her freedom to become more than a wife and mother.

In the popular songs that came to be part of Somalia’s literary landscape by the end of
the Second World War, love was the most common theme. Growing up in Mogadishu,
Halima was surrounded by the new images of a modern Somali society that these songs
presented. In most songs, two lovers have a conversation. Instead of obeying the
traditional rules of arranged marriages, the couples express a new view of gender
relations – one that promotes the mutuality of the couple’s choice to marry. Halima’s
decision to let Mohamed wait for three years while she got to know him better and
made a conscious decision whether or not to marry him, can be read within the lines of these new views on gender relations. Likewise, the conversations between men and women in popular songs depict girls as strong and challenging towards men. In many ways, the trials to which women subject the men they have fallen in love with reminded me of Halima’s playful hesitation about speaking to her future husband. Bearing in mind her father’s warning about men and her own dreams for a future beyond the household, she had to act strategically.

Kapteijns writes that in many popular Somali love songs the girl first appears to cut short her suitor’s attempts to speak of romantic love by using traditional rules and expectations. The girl’s caution can be linked to the danger that men’s interest in women is often selfish and short-lived and can in the long run ruin her chance for a good marriage. “Just as appeals to tradition can be a tool for limiting women’s rights and options, so appeals to romantic love can trap them; when the latter is a threat, women’s own appeals to tradition can serve as a protective screen.” (Kapteijns 1999: 133) Thus, the young women use tradition for their own ends and appear to be strong, decisive and in control of their lives.

In her story Halima fulfils the moral obligations of an unmarried girl and knows how to combine them elegantly with the possibilities given by a more modern concept of womanhood. By playing the traditional against the modern and vice versa, Halima takes control of her situation. The woman she depicts in her story doesn’t at all match the stereotypical image of the Somali woman as weak and subservient. Instead, she stories the growing up of a young woman who, by following the invitation to study in Moscow, breaks with traditional limitations to a girl’s freedom of movement, and cleverly manoeuvres her way around the different ideas that are spun around Somali womanhood.
A Taste of the Past

It was a rainy day, foggy patches of wet greyness hanging like a thick, impermeable curtain from the sky. Gusts of cold and moist Antarctic wind swept through the deserted streets of Footscray, leaving me chilled to the bone, anticipating the beginning of the inevitable arrival of winter.

“Quickly, close that door,” Halima said as I entered the house, letting in a blast of cold air. “Come, sit down next to the heater, darling, you must be frozen from the bike ride. Oh, how scared you always make me riding that bike everywhere. You’re tiny and the wind today is so much stronger than you!” I laughed at the idea of the wind being so strong that it would lift me with my bike up into the air, carrying me away, spitting me out somewhere else. “Look what I found at the Footscray market,” I said, trying to change the topic. I took a papaya out of my backpack and presented it to Halima. “Maybe it helps us pretend that winter isn’t coming yet.” “What a good idea,” she said. “You know, I love papayas and mangoes.”

Later on, when we had settled, huddled together on the dark wooden couch next to the heater that blew hot air into the living room, we shared the papaya I had brought. Biting into its soft, sweet flesh, Halima said: “How I love the sweetness of papayas. But you know what? They just never taste the same like at home.” And suddenly, the taste of the papayas seemed to awake in her the texture of a feeling slumbering deep inside of her – the bittersweet feeling of being-at-home in Mogadishu.

Halima’s disappointment over the lacking sweetness in the papaya reminds me of Nadia Seremetakis (1996: 1-5), who, in the opening section of The Senses Still, describes her search for the texture and taste of the perfect peach she had grown up with in Greece. That peach had “a thin skin touched with fuzz and a soft matte off-white color alternating with rosy hues”, it was “well rounded and smooth” and it had the perfect taste, “firm yet moist” (Seremetakis 1996: 1). On a trip back home from the US to visit
family and friends in Athens, she realises that peaches suddenly taste different. She finds out that the peaches she used to eat since her childhood have been replaced by new varieties, which, as everyone else also begins to remark, are tasteless. The disappearance of the perfect peach of the past soon turns into a wider narrative of remembering things past amongst Seremetakis’ friends and family. It almost seems as if the displaced peach has awoken memories that are not stored in the mind, but in the body: “It was as if when something leaves, it only goes externally, for its body persists within persons. The peach was its memory, and as if both had gone underground, they waited to be named. My naming of its absence resurrected observations, commentaries, stories, some of which encapsulated whole epochs marked by their own sensibilities.” (Seremetakis 1996: 2)

In her work Seremetakis demonstrates the close entanglement between the senses, memory, history, forgetfulness and narrative. She speaks of a “memory of the senses” (Seremetakis 1993), of memory that literally creeps under the skin and into our bodily senses. Close to Marcel Proust’s famous “madeleine episode”, she shows that the simple act of biting into a peach or (as in Proust’s case) into a madeleine cake can set some of these sensory reminders free and evoke a flood of memories. In Proust’s case the memories evoked by the taste of the madeleine leads to the Remembrance of Things Past, a novel in seven parts in which the narrator meticulously pieces together the memories of his life. In Seremetakis’ case, the taste of the peach leads to a “hunt” at Athens’ markets for the taste of the peaches of her past and to a nostalgic aftertaste, for “nothing tastes as good as the past” (Seremetakis 1996: 1). In Halima’s case, the taste of papaya first took her back to the ‘fantastic days’ in Mogadishu. But unlike in the storying of her childhood days, as described in chapter I, when she could encapsulate all that had happened to Somalia ever since and draw strength from memories of a beautiful past, this time the look back didn’t work as a source of strength. Instead, the papaya, in failing to bring a taste of the sweetness of the past, provoked the painful realisation of all that was lost.

“So often do I think about the beautiful trees that I planted around my house,” Halima sighed. “Papaya trees, mango trees, I had planted them all. Every morning I got up early

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27On the theme of food and migrant memory, see also, for example: Eves 1996; Lupton 1996; Weiss 1997; Winegardner 1998; Duruz 1999; Harbottle 1997; Sutton 2001; Mankekar 2002; Ray 2004.
and sat down on a chair in the garden to watch the birds picking the fruits from the trees. The birds loved my garden. And the flowers, they had such an amazing smell, I can’t even describe it to you.” Sharing the papaya, Halima’s garden in Mogadishu suddenly felt so close, so here, so with and in us – and yet so sadly distant and far away. The garden with all the beautiful mango and papaya trees, the birds that inhabited them, and the flowers that were at home there, they all came to life in Halima’s memory and conveyed a sense of the web of smells, sounds and other beings that weave a feeling of being-at-home.

“Every morning I used to eat a papaya from my own garden, and they were so sweet – as if someone had added sugar to them.” And then, with the last bits of fruit cleared from the plate, this fruit that just didn’t carry the sweetness of home, the memory place vanished. A feeling of sadness hung in the air, a sadness for everything that had made up that place and now seemed lost. Getting up to take away the empty plate, Halima said decidedly: “Anyway, who knows if the trees are still alive? It’s all lost. Everything is destroyed now.” On that note Halima, giving me a sad smile, left for the kitchen.

And thus the story had ended; there was nothing more to say. The violence of the war had not only destroyed or scarred people, it had also violated places. Thinking of Halima’s house and garden that still existed in Mogadishu, and of the strangers who had taken possession of it, I could feel how for Halima it had become a place emptied of itself and its inner meaning. War and violence had literally de-placed it. Like Omar’s ‘dust-state’, the place Halima had looked back into resisted storying. While I felt like comforting Halima, telling her how much her story had given me a sense of all the sadness and suffering she had been through, its abrupt ending had also made it clear that the telling of this very story had reached its limits. Beyond its endnote, what else was left to tell that was sayable, shareable to anyone in the outside world?

**Wounded Stories**

Experiences of suffering and violence can sometimes be felt as so removed from the everyday world of the here and now, as so extremely other, that people struggle to integrate them into a constituent flow of words that make sense, into a story that can be
shared (see Langer 1991; Felman & Laub 1992; Rogers, Leydesdorff & Dawson 1999).
What is left, then, are mutterings, stutters, and silence.

Primo Levi, a survivor of Auschwitz, spent much of his life thinking about the role of retelling and bearing witness to the almost unspeakable experiences in the death camps. He came to believe that traumatic events are experiences of such singularity that only the person who lived through them can bear witness to them; the only true witnesses to the concentration camps were the “drowned” ones – all those people who died there without being able to tell the world about the violence that was done to them (Levi 1988). Despite the years he spent telling his own story, bearing witness to all he had seen and lived through, Levi became deeply depressed by the lack of understanding and recognition that many of his listeners expressed. He felt as if the stories of trauma and injustice he was trying to share with the world hit a wall of numb deafness, catapulting the woundedness these stories carried back into himself. Stories of extreme suffering can only be told, it seems, if there are listeners sensitive enough to, if not fully understand, at least sense the untellable dimensions of some memories.

When Halima so abruptly moved from the beauty of the memory place of her Mogadishu-home to the utter sense of displacement that surrounds it now, I as the listener sensed the end of what was tellable and shareable. Even if she had told me all the violent details that had turned her former home into something lost, it wouldn’t have changed the insurmountable fact that I had not lived through it with her, that, while she was running for her life, this life-changing moment had gone unnoticed in my corner of the world. While her world was breaking down, I had probably spent a normal day.

In his poem ‘Musée des Beaux Arts’ W.H. Auden describes suffering as something we always witness removed, as something that happens in the midst of us and yet appears to be distant and unapproachable (Auden 1976). Looking at Pieter Bruegel’s masterpiece ‘Landscape with the Fall of Icarus’, Auden notices how, while the painting foregrounds a beautiful landscape and people peacefully pursuing their everyday activities, in the background is a scene of incomprehensible suffering – a drowning Icarus, fallen from the sky, his wings melted, his head already under water:

About suffering they were never wrong,
The old Masters: how well they understood
Its human position: how it takes place
While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along…

In the face of such sadness and suffering, it seems, not just Icarus’ life is shattered, but with it also the possibility of understanding the world in terms of the smooth wholeness that Michel De Certeau imagined Icarus’ view onto the world to be. The people surrounding this cruel scene, the walkers of the everyday, find it impossible to integrate such an event into the normality of daily life. As a result, they look but they don’t see; they know, but they don’t understand. The Old Masters’ real triumph then, was to confront us with our fated detachment (Morris 1997: 28-29). In Auden’s view suffering contains at its heart an absolute and insurmountable otherness. According to David B. Morris (1997: 27), it is a counterview to the modern parable of the Good Samaritan and adds an irreducibly nonverbal dimension to suffering: “The quality of such suffering remains as blank to thought as the void opened up by a scream.” Morris suggests that exactly because of its paradox status, the scream can serve as a fruitful image for the metaphorical silence that is at the heart of suffering. “A scream is not speech but the most intense possible negation of language: sound and terror approaching the limits of absolute muteness. Like the ceremonial wailing of grief, it seems to come from a region where words fail.” (Morris 1997: 27)

But while Morris’ metaphor of the scream captures all the layers of the unspeakable that surround memories of suffering, it wasn’t the language Halima used to share her experiences of war and destruction. Her silence was not absolute. It wasn’t like a wall that wouldn’t let anyone through. Instead, there were many attempts to let me understand, beginnings of stories, never told to the end, snippets and glimpses of war and being on the run, and memories of violence and pain suddenly breaking into the here and now to quickly disappear again, leaving behind a trace of unspoken words and feelings.

While telling a constitutive story of her flight as a chronology of meaningful events was simply impossible to Halima, she also didn’t render these experiences fully untellable. Within the controllable realm of the fragment it was possible for her to speak of moments of extreme pain, while being able to quickly let go of them again, moving on and away from them, back to the here and now, to a worldliness we shared together.
The fragment could be seen as a way of protecting herself against a sense of slipping out of the world. As Hannah Arendt (1998: 50-51) writes in *The Human Condition*, pain can be experienced as a loss of the world, as a form of *worldlessness*; pain cannot “transform into a shape fit for public appearance”, for it is one of the most private of all human experiences, one that is at the borderline of “life as ‘being among men’ (*inter hominess esse*) and death”. According to Arendt (1998: 51), pain is so subjective and removed from the world of things and men that it cannot assume an appearance at all.

Thus, in contrast to the fluidity and lightness that mark the way Halima storied other parts of her life, her memories of war and displacement were disrupted and unconnected, almost like volcanoes, bubbling up pieces of memory every now and then, bringing them to the surface, just to quickly lapse again. It was in the form of fragments and glimpses that she told me about the outbreak of the war, of the sound of the gunfire surrounding her house, making it feel like a trap, and of moments of utter fear she felt upon leaving Mogadishu to flee 500 kilometres southwards to the city of Kismaayo, the place where her husband’s sub-clan had a stronghold which they hoped could provide protection. It was in the realm of the breathlessness of someone on the run that Halima raced through the chain of events that rolled over her family: of the clan violence that broke out once they had reached Kismaayo; of her husband’s arrest by a rival clan and the whispered murmurs that reached her that he had been killed, and the news that reached him that she had been killed, which led to years spent apart; of her decision to leave Somalia on an overcrowded ship to Yemen in an attempt to save her children’s life; of her decision to make her way from Yemen to Dubai, where her two sisters Zeinab and Amina were living; of the months she spent on the move, trying to reach the Emirates with her four children and her sister Sahra’s little son, whom Halima had taken with her.

So fragmented were these stories, and so painful, that Halima didn’t want to read them again. While she allowed me to, in my own words, recount some of the story-fragments, she made it clear that these displaced stories weren’t to be retold in her own voice. It was only around her point of arrival in Dubai, when all the running and hiding came to an end, when there was time to rest and take a deep breath that Halima’s storytelling could let go of the fragment’s protective shelter, when the story itself could take breath again as well, and regain its sense of balance and order.
The hardest part of my life was in Dubai. If you didn’t have legal documents to stay, your children could not go to school. So I worried about that. And my husband was not with me at that time, because we had lost each other during the war and I didn’t know that he was still alive.

You had to work to get a visa, but you couldn’t get work without legal documents. It was like running around in circles. One of my sisters was in France. She was working, so she said that she would always send me a little money. I also had my two sisters Zeinab and Amina there and their husbands were working, so they were all helping me to pay for my rent.

After some time I began looking for ways to create my own income. I started to connect myself to Somalis overseas, to people living in America, Canada and London. I contacted friends and they told me who owned Somali shops there. When they wanted to buy clothes for their shops, they always had to travel to the Emirates. So I negotiated with them. They knew who I was, and they trusted me, so I told them that I could help them and buy the things that they wanted from Dubai, send it to them and then get a percentage from the profit. They said: “We will allow you ten per cent of whatever you buy, because if we had to take an airplane it would cost us thousands of dollars.” I knew the clothes, the styles and the things they were interested in, so they started sending me 5,000, 10,000, sometimes 30,000 dollars, and out of that money I was getting a percentage.

And then there was the problem that my children couldn’t go to school, so I went to see Sheikh Saqr, the leader of the emirate Ras al-Khaima, where I lived. I went to him and said: “Initially we were three Somali families who fled here, but the others chose to go to Italy, London and America. Their children even have passports to live there now and I am here, and I don’t have anything. If you don’t want to help me, just let me know, I will try my best to go somewhere else. Otherwise, you are the ruler of this country, and God is
looking at you and sees that we are struggling. So can you help me?” He immediately answered yes, and he gave me the permission that my children could go to school.

So that’s when my children started going to school. I sent them to school, and when they were there I went to the other side of the city, collected clothes and put them into boxes and sent them with the post to the Somali shops overseas. I faxed the documents to the people and received my ten per cent. Those ten per cent I divided and bought all the food for two or three months, dry food, and got the books and pencils and what my children needed. Most of the time that helped me survive.

I spent twelve years in the Emirates, but I never felt at home there. They always see you as a stranger there. I was always running around in circles. If you are staying with them for so long you should receive proper documents, or a job, but I didn’t get anything. I always remained a foreigner, a stranger.

So it was really, really hard for me. But I adapted to that life, because I didn’t have anywhere to go, I couldn’t go back to Somalia. If they had sent me back, I would have been killed. At that time they were searching for all the people who had worked with the government. So on the one side Dubai was heaven for me, but on the other side I felt that there were lots of gaps.

While I was living there, I was often thinking about what was happening in Somalia and that was very hard. When my children weren’t there, I was crying. I write Somali poetry, so I began writing about my country. I wrote: “Don’t worry, my country, I will be back.” That was what I said. And I wrote a poem that said: “I am far from you. Although I never wished to be out of your reach, God created these evil people who started this war. But, my country, I will be with you soon, don’t worry, don’t worry.” That was my poem.

I was all the time worrying. I felt hopeless, I felt like I was nowhere, like I was no one. I felt all this, but at the same time, what made my heart strong was believing in God. It helped me a lot. I prayed and worshipped God as much as I
could, so I got a feeling of relief. I felt that there was help, that sooner or later I would get help.

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If You’re Alive, It’s Better to Smile

For a long time I struggled to make sense of the way my Austrian grandmother, Oma Pepi, remembered the war years. While she didn’t build a thick wall of silence around those times like so many other people in the village, she told us kids wartime stories that were light, funny and beautiful – as if the entire war had been one big adventure.

She told us how her father, a conservative Catholic who used to be the village’s mayor, was forced to flee when the Nazis occupied Millstatt, and hid in the mountains with a few other members of the conservative resistance for the duration of the war. Sometimes she would take us to the war memorial behind the church, telling us to find the name of her beloved little brother Telesphor who had died as a soldier in Russia and for whom we lit a candle. But instead of telling us about her emotions, about the fear I much later learned she had felt, a fear of everyone in the village and particularly of the group of people who had ganged up on her family and attempted to find and kill her father, she told us adventurous and funny stories of her father’s years in the mountains. Her favourite stories highlighted her father’s strong and heroic character, how he outwitted anyone pursuing him by using the creek that weaves its way from the mountains down to the lake in Millstatt as a secret way to smuggle food and messages to his hiding place, and how she was able to listen secretly to the Feindsender, the forbidden BBC German service. My grandmother’s wartime stories always peaked in the time immediately after the end of the war, when she fell in love with my grandfather, a Dutch man who had come to the village as a forced labourer and who, on a cold spring-night in the mountains, stole a first kiss from her.

As we grew older, a few years before my grandmother died, snippets of other stories came to the surface. She told us how during the war her neighbour, a fervent Nazi, who was now living three houses further up, had tried to shoot her from his window. She told us that her brother Telesphor’s decision to join the Wehrmacht hadn’t been
voluntary at all, as she had pictured it before. Instead, the local Nazi officials, angry about her father’s oppositional stance, made sure that, when the war started, he was the first one in the village to be conscripted to join the army. She told us about Frau Eva, the old lady next door, who had a disabled child. She was trying to hide her child from the authorities but was turned in by one of the other villagers; the child was taken away to a ‘children’s home’ and died in a medical experiment weeks later. I was shocked by these stories. This friendly old man, who always treated us with his homemade honey or jams, had tried to kill her? It was simply inconceivable to me how my grandmother could walk past his garden every day and have a chat with him about the weather, totally oblivious to what he had tried to do. And how could she go on telling us all these stories of the war that sounded like it had all just been a big laugh? How, in the end, could she laugh about it at all?

In his shockingly beautiful nine-hour documentary *Shoah*, French filmmaker Claude Lanzmann asks exactly this question (Lanzmann 1985). Within the film’s human tapestry of horrifying, disheartening, but also beautiful and heartbreaking stories told by survivors of the Nazi concentration camps and by other eyewitnesses, there is one brief moment that struck me so strongly that it has not left me ever since.

The sequence shows a conversation between the filmmaker and Michael Podchlebnik, a man in his mid-fifties who survived the death-camp in Chelmno near Łódź. While Lanzmann wants to know about Podchlebnik’s feelings, his memories, his thoughts, the survivor tells him that he doesn’t like speaking of those times; that he prefers to think that he is alive and that these bad times are over now. After a moment of silence, with the camera resting on the survivor’s face, the filmmaker asks Podchlebnik whether he really is alive, or whether he is just that: a survivor. With a smile on his face, Podchlebnik insists that yes, he believes he is alive, and that he has to thank God for the ability to forget. There is a long silence, the camera piercing into the survivor’s smiling face. Lanzmann, insisting that this cannot be all, asks: “Why do you smile all the time?” “What do you want me to do? Cry?” Michael Podchlebnik responds. “Sometimes you smile, sometimes you cry. And if you’re alive it’s better to smile.”

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28 Another, probably more prominent filmic elaboration of the same question is Roberto Begnini’s *La vita è bella* (Life is beautiful), in which Benigni plays Guido Orefice, a Jewish Italian man, who, by making use of his imagination and humour, shields his son from the horrors of internment in a Nazi concentration camp (Begnini 1997).
I was struck by Lanzmann’s insistent question, “Why do you smile all the time?” Like my grandmother’s wartime love and adventure stories, doesn’t this smile, this silence over all the suffering, the violence and the atrocities allow those who created the mayhem to escape the consequences of their deeds all too easily? But then, while watching the film, I was horrified by the consequences of thinking through the other option: What if Michael Podchlebnik didn’t smile all the time? What if he chose to speak of those memories that he just didn’t want to be part of his being-alive anymore? What if smiling was his way of continuing the story he couldn’t share with us in all its cruel details, but continuing it in a way that allowed him to end a story of sheer suffering and trauma with the recuperation of control over his own life and his own story?

Instead of seeing Michael Podchlebnik’s smile as an attempt to suppress, to neglect and to hide, couldn’t it be read as an attempt to regain a sense of empowerment? And wasn’t my grandmother’s emphasis on her father’s heroism and on the sneaky kiss that began a love story, a way to turn a loss into a win? As Michael Jackson suggests in The Politics of Storytelling, survival is not just physical; it is also the ability to survive socially. And it is, he notes, existential, “being able to make plans again, to choose, to outlive that time when one was reduced to nothingness, beaten like an animal, ordered to do the most shameful and terrible things in order to be allowed to live, defeated by one’s abject powerlessness” (Jackson 2002: 104).

Looked at it from the perspective of the social and existential dimensions of survival, Halima’s decision not to emphasise the disturbing and disempowering experiences of her life story, but rather to focus on the moments of hope and victory instead, appears in a new light. Perhaps the silences, the disjointed accounts of painful times of being on the run do not just stand for the impossibility to give suffering a voice and a language; perhaps the choice to highlight the positives and to downplay the negatives is a way to regain some sense of power and balance, a standing within a world that, not long ago, seemed to bereave her of any sense of choice.

Halima’s story of the years she spent in Ras al-Khaimah is not one of glory and happiness, but what distinguished them from the fragmented and untellable period of flight was that they held out the possibility that she could become an actor within her
own life again. Her story speaks of difficult times, of the hardships of being in a constant state of limbo in a country where she didn’t have a legal status, of the financial instability and the feeling of being “nowhere”, like being “no one”. But it doesn’t get caught in a state of paralysis and liminality. Even her poem, despite all the sadness and loss it speaks of, is inherently one of hope and change, for, as she says, “I will be with you soon, don’t worry, don’t worry”. Halima’s account of that time doesn’t fit with the public image of the refugee as helpless, hopeless and voiceless (Malkki 1995; 1996). In fact, Halima doesn’t once use the word ‘refugee’ to describe her situation. It also doesn’t fit with the idea that all that refugees have to share with the world are stories of suffering and hardship, or that they are forever lost in ‘trauma stories’ that seem to cry out for help and intervention. The question Halima’s story raises is the same question inherent in the troubles I encountered with my grandmother’s stories or that Claude Lanzmann bumped into when interviewing Michael Podchlebnik: How can people speak, smile, live on after having experienced extreme suffering and how can they integrate such memories into a here and now, into this human world?

Social Suffering

In her story of the times she spent in Ras al-Khaimah, Halima highlights the importance of poems as a means of communicating with her lost country, of finding a form of relief from the desperation she felt for its loss. Directly addressing Somalia like a person, she almost seems to soothe her country like a crying child: “Don’t worry, my country,” she says, “I will be back”. Comforting her country is also a way of comforting herself, of finding a way to dry the secret tears she is shedding while her children are at school. But while Halima’s poem gives a glimpse of the sadness and suffering she experienced, her suffering doesn’t stand by and for itself. Instead, her suffering becomes the suffering of a country, a nation, a community, and, only within these limits, of herself.

Albeit in a very different geographical, historical and cultural setting, in the context of the eruption of the Rabaul Volcano in Papua New Guinea, which in 1994 destroyed the town of Rabaul, the ways its former inhabitants communicated the pain over the loss of place resonates with Halima’s poem. Lamenting the loss of Rabaul and yearning for its resurrection, people addressed the town like a beloved person. “Rabaul, you are so
“sweet,” a famous song of those times says, “even if I left, I would still think of you.” (Neumann 1997: 177) Drawing from the poetic strength of such a means of addressing suffering, it seems to me that more needs to be said about the way Halima’s poem invests Mogadishu with the characteristics of a human being. Why does she embed the suffering in a humanised place rather than within her own self?

In an essay, Lidwien Kapteijns examines a set of poems that discursively use Mogadishu as a means of mediating the violence of the state collapse. Many of the poems she analyses were written by Somalis in exile and disseminated through the Internet amongst Somalis worldwide. Kapteijns was struck by the number of poems she found that dealt with the collapse of the Somali state without linking this wider social context of war and violence to personal suffering. While most of the poems, like Halima’s, directly address Mogadishu and speak of its destruction as the destruction of a person, the poets never situate their individual pains and sorrows within it. Kapteijns relates this absence of personal emotions to the point that much of the Somali poetry about the impact of violence is written or performed with the purpose of effecting change and putting forward solutions that go beyond the individual (Kapteijns 2010: 30). “It might be argued that, in the Somali context, this poetry is the form of speech par excellence and is created to move its audience in purposeful ways”, Kapteijns (2010: 31) writes. As I have pointed out before, poems and songs written and performed in the realm of the Somali orature are sensual and poetic texts, but they are also made with the intention of persuading their audience.

On a similar note, Christine Zarowsky, in her work on Somali Ethiopian refugees, found that the people she spoke to did not discuss refugee issues in terms of individual suffering. Instead, they tended to emphasise the socio-political dimensions of their experiences as refugees (Zarowsky 2000: 178). She describes the way Somali Ethiopian refugees spoke about their feelings about their war experiences as a “politics of emotions”, as a way of linking their personal experiences to wider political claims (Zarowsky 2004: 200). Zarowsky stresses that while people’s everyday experiences included emotions, their principal concern was for justice, survival and a decent human life. Her informants wanted to tell her a master-narrative that revolved around dispossession, anger and injustice, but they did not convey their individual miseries, as
they knew that this would not help them in resolving their difficulties (Zarowsky 2004: 201).

As Arthur and Joan Kleinman argue, the dominant Western idea of suffering is one that imagines it in a timeless and placeless void, free of local people and local worlds. In many parts of the world, however, people don’t deal with suffering in terms of its individuality (Kleinman & Kleinman 1997: 7-8). Suffering then needs to be looked at beyond its representation as inherently individual and be mapped out as a social experience, as what Arthur Kleinman, Veena Das and Margaret Lock describe as social suffering (Kleinman, Das & Lock 1997: ix, my emphasis). This way of emphasizing the collective suffering of a nation over personal emotions is also mirrored in Halima’s means of situating herself within her life story. This suggests that in the Somali context, thinking of suffering and storytelling in individual terms is problematic. But it also leads me to think that even on a broader level thinking of suffering as something that is inevitably rooted within one lonely individual’s life story needs to be questioned.

In many respects the image of the refugee as a figure who cannot be understood beyond the suffering she has experienced, as a pure victim thrown back to the barest bareness of life, is linked to the way public and academic discourses have come to deal with the phenomenon of flight and asylum in psychopathological terms. For example, over the last decade in Australia, the vast majority of academic publications dealing with refugees have written about them in terms of trauma and illness. Didier Fassin and Estelle D’Halluin have described a historic shift from a political to a medicalised discourse about refugees, and they argue that this has led to a paradigm in which refugees are seen in terms of their individual psychopathology, and their stories go unheard. “The refugee’s body, thus, becomes the place of an inscription, the meaning of which relates to a double temporality: an inscription of power, through the persecution they suffered in their home country, and an inscription of truth, insofar as it bears witness to it for the institutions of their host country”, they write (Fassin and D’Halluin 2005: 598).

Having survived times of extreme hardship and suffering, refugees who manage to reach places of refuge and safety often become subject to another form of appropriation. It is here that their most intimate memories and images of violence are turned into what
Arthur and Joan Kleinman call “trauma stories”. “These trauma stories then become the currency, the symbolic capital, with which they enter exchanges for physical resources and achieve the status of political refugee”, they write. “Increasingly, those complicated stories, based in real events, yet reduced to a core cultural image of victimization (a postmodern hallmark), are used by health professionals to rewrite social experience in medical terms.” (Kleinman & Kleinman 1997: 10)

The idea of linking ‘refugeeness’ to different levels of suffering plays an increasingly important role in the Australian context and influences decision-making processes over the regional focus of the resettlement of refugees as well as the foci of service providers dealing with the social and psychological well-being of newly arrived refugees. These developments can be seen as part of a larger shift towards a politics of suffering and compassion. With the entry of suffering into politics, Didier Fassin has argued convincingly, humanitarianism takes on a new language. Within this language, the biological life of the destitute and unfortunate is given preference over their biographical life, “the life through which they could, independently, give a meaning to their own existence” (Fassin 2011: 254). The figure of the refugee becomes inescapably moulded into a problem in need of intervention, the shadow of trauma following it wherever it goes. The lack of a proper place for their stories to be heard engulfs the figure of the refugee, steeping it in a sense of placelessness and homelessness, leaving it with nothing more than its bare survival. It is, then, not surprising that refugees are often portrayed as rootless, lost and utterly out of place.

But how do these discursive dynamics make sense in Halima’s life world, where the pain and suffering felt in her own body stand side by side with the pain and suffering felt by an entire country? How does the expectation that she will have a ‘proper’ trauma story as a humanitarian entrant relate to the strength and resilience her stories embody?

**Who Doesn’t Climb a Mountain Will End in a Well**

The very first time Halima and I met in the Footscray kebab café to begin recording her life story, she made an attempt to explain to me the impact the war had on her life. She told me a story of how she had found the power and determination to keep moving on. It was a story of such strength that it flung open a window that helped me see why, after
experiencing extreme forms of suffering and sadness, the sharing of stories of hope, of little victories and laughter can be essential to the existential and social survival of human beings.

“When the civil war erupted,” Halima said, “everything was destroyed, everything was taken, and we ran away. I remember one day we didn’t have anything to eat that we could give to our children and we were nowhere, because we had run away from the city and we didn’t have anywhere to go, because here’s a bomb, there’s a fire, there’s another problem. At that time you only gave maize to the birds, you didn’t give it to the people. But I took some maize and I had a little stick to grind it. And my husband, he sat down and sang to me: ‘Halima, the person who doesn’t want to climb mountains, will end up living in a well’.”

“What did he mean by singing those words to you?” I asked. “It means that when you are in trouble, you have to try your best to climb out of the hole, the water well, and you will be safe, otherwise you will die in there,” she explained. “He was trying to say that it’s a hardship to grind maize, because he knew me, I used to be a very important person, I had my car, I had my servant doing this and that for me, so he was worried that when you have had that life and you lose it, that I would give up life. He didn’t want me to give up, and he was saying: ‘Halima, this grinding-thing means that we are climbing. Please, be patient.’ He always said those words, he repeated and repeated and repeated them. I will never forget that.”

Like Michael Podchlebnik, who chose not to repeat the stories of the times when he was an object of other people’s will and choices, in her stories, Halima chose to give her innermost strength to leaving behind the well, this hole that represented the lowest point possible. Her husband’s song helped her to focus on moving forwards instead of backwards, on climbing mountains without looking back, on not giving up after all she had lost. And just as Mohamed’s song had helped Halima to regain the strength she needed, so did the stories she told me about her life. Instead of losing herself in tales of deep loss and suffering which would have risked throwing her back into the well, she told me stories that worked towards transporting her away from these limitations.

In her work amongst Somali Youth in North American high schools, Murray Forman highlights the danger inherent in expecting every refugee to be the carrier of a trauma
story. Such stories tend to lock the narrators into the identity position of the ‘refugee’, not allowing them to move beyond it and emphasise who they have become ever since. Forman stresses that for many refugees, the myth of living to tell the tale of their survival, can, in reality, lead to a prison of another form (Forman 2001: 44).

Halima’s emphasis on strength and resilience, on climbing as opposed to free fall, calls into question the way refugees have come to be imagined as haunted by trauma and loss. In fact, her story calls into question the entire way we have come to deal with loss as something that requires medical intervention. The strong focus on traumatic memory calls for a critical look into the way the expressions of such extreme experiences as war and flight are thought of. As Michael Jackson (2005b: 355-356) argues, in the same way as it is tempting to see history as a series of defining moments and critical events whose force we continue to feel in the here and now, so is the way we tend to describe the aftermath of war and destruction by indicating that “nothing will ever be the same again”. He criticises that this view of history and war downplays the ways in which past events are continuously transmuted into myth. At the same time such a view also ignores the ways in which the present appropriates the past and in doing so revises the way the past appears to us (Jackson 2005: 356 If, as suggested before, the past is not a foreign country but something that leaks into our being-here and has the power to constitute it, then the past needs to be looked at beyond mere historical consciousness, when applied to people’s everyday lives. Halima’s storytelling – whether it is travelling through the fantastic days of her childhood, revolutionary Somalia or the outbreak of war and destruction – suggests that we need to consider the past as a present concern, as a concern relevant to the way people live their lives in the present (Hirsch 2008: 25). At the same time, her stories also suggest that the very act of storytelling can be a means of dealing with the hereeness of that past, of reworking and re-integrating it into a here and now.

Keeping the details of war and violence fragmentary while emphasising moments of strength and achievement was a means for Halima to, in the here and now, in the moment of the telling, move beyond those debilitating moments and reconstitute herself in new, powerful and active ways. As Jackson puts it, freedom is always exercised within limits. Human life thus can be described as a “cybernetic” search for a balance between what can and cannot be done under given circumstances. At the same time, he
argues, every human being likes to act as if she is in control of the situation, “no matter how forcefully circumstance has obliged or compelled her to act in one way rather than another” (Jackson 2005b: 374). The researcher therefore needs to listen carefully, to “double listen” as Jay Marlowe (2010: 192-193) puts it in the context of his work with Sudanese refugees: to hear not just the harrowing and traumatic experiences they are expecting, but to also have an open ear for the stories of hope and resilience, of what helped them through these hard times in the first place.

That afternoon in the kebab house with Halima I realised why my grandmother had chosen to story the war beyond its destructive and terrifying forces. The need for her to move on and, like Halima, at least in her stories, to climb mountains instead of risking to get stuck in the well the war had brought her so dangerously close to, was her priority. If my grandmother was still alive, able to tell me her stories again, I would do what I did when Halima told me about those hard days in her life, when she was running around in circles and yet had the guts to approach the powerful sheikh of Ras al-Khaimah to remind him of his obligation to look after her: I shared a laugh with her. I would laugh with my grandmother and tell her about a woman, my friend Halima, who lives by the saying that it is better to throw all your energy into climbing mountains rather than getting stuck in a well.
4.

PLACELESS DREAMS

Nomadic Trajectories

In our age, so often described in terms of change and liquidity, of uprootedness and
deterritorialisation, many intellectuals have come to long for a means of replacing the
rigid and suffocating narrowness of national belonging with the lightness and ease of
the vagabond, the nomad, the traveller, who, owning nothing but her own life,
continuously slips in and out of different worlds (see for example: Deleuze 1977;
Kristeva 1986; Deleuze & Guattari 1987; Clifford 1989; Braidotti 1994; Chambers
1994).

As a child, I dreamt of becoming such a person, an adventurer and traveller, always on
my way to somewhere else, at home everywhere. That I had such an early fascination
with travelling and that I became an anthropologist, moving to the other end of the
world to write about refugees, was perhaps no coincidence. In my family, leaving the
suffocating narrowness of the village behind, throwing oneself into the openness of the
wide world, was always storied as the highest of all achievements. This urge to journey
and move, to go beyond the protection of the known and to question oneself and one’s
point of departure, might be connected to my family’s discontent with their role as
outsiders within Millstatt’s closely knit social web. Despite my grandmother’s
adventure stories, the war had destroyed many of the social relationships that were at
the heart of the village. The villagers’ deep-seated bitterness about the lost war, palpable
behind the wall of silence that was built around everything that had happened during
those years, became so unbearable to my father and his brothers that the idea of
travelling came to stand for a sense of liberation. And it was this feeling of
emancipation and freedom that led them, one by one, to move away from the village,
“to look further than the next mountain”, as my father put it.

But beyond my family’s history of emplacement, the idea of travelling, of roaming and
self-estrangement, has far reaching historical roots within the Western imagination. As
John Durham Peters argues, they can even be seen as the central story told in European
civilisation (Durham Peters 1999). He highlights the fact that many of the most famous figures in Western narratives are characterised by their mobility: Abraham, the sojourner and stranger who never returns to his home; Odysseus who only returns home to Penelope after a lifelong odyssey; Oedipus, the outcast within his own city. Even modern philosophy makes use of mobility: Nietzsche, the alpinist, stepping from mountaintop to mountaintop; Heidegger, wandering through the Black Forest; Benjamin, the flâneur, strolling through Paris; Michel De Certeau celebrating pedestrians and poachers as freedom fighters; and Deleuze, declaring the nomad as the embodiment of postmodernity (Durham Peters 1999: 18).

Many postmodern intellectuals like to think of themselves as always on the move, in transit, crossing frontiers, or in between worlds. But Durham Peters points out that even this central motif of postmodern thinking, the idea that human identity is discontinuous with itself, can be traced back to old Jewish and Christian visions of the human. Both have the incompleteness of the self and estrangement from the home as key themes. “Social categories of stranger, pilgrim, outcast, vagabond, tent dweller, and nomad all receive primordial formulation in the Hebrew Bible”, he writes (Durham Peters 1999: 22).

Isn’t it exactly within these narrative lines of exile and eternal wandering, of estrangement and non-belonging that the figure of the refugee has come to be shaped in our minds and stories? For closely connected to the image of the refugee as the lonely sufferer and carrier of horrific trauma stories is the idea of the refugee as the ultimate embodiment of placelessness and homelessness. And, considering the emphasis on deterritorialisation and boundlessness, on mobility and transnational social connections, that marks much contemporary writing in anthropology, it seems that this motif of the eternal wanderer has not lost any of its strength and fascination for Western academia. For it is within these lines that the refugee has come to be championed as the embodiment of the dream of a deterritorialised world, holding its ‘rootless’, ‘creolised’, ‘rhizomatic’ identities (Malkki 1995a) against the narrow-mindedness of a world that likes to see people as irretrievably connected to specific places.

Much of the current urge to think nomadically was stimulated by a slim book published in 1986 by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. In Nomadology: The War Machine they
celebrate nomads for their ability to move beyond the spatially controlled realm of the state. This mobility and evasion of authority, they suggest, turns them into postmodern warriors, ultimate outsiders who resist submitting themselves to the control and categorisation of the nation state. Although nomads often follow customary routes, these routes do not fulfil the function of the sedentary road, which parcels out a closed space to people: “The nomadic trajectory does the opposite: it distributes people (or animals) in an open space, one that is indefinite and noncommunicating.” (Deleuze and Guattari 1986: 50-51)

It is through the infiltration of these mobile characters, these non-belingers, who cannot be pinned down to a place but whose slippery movements in the vast open space pinch and provoke the state’s authority, that the limits of state control are put radically into the spotlight. Deleuze and Guattari remain vague about who exactly these postmodern heroes actually are. But given the determination with which nations in the global north fortify their borders under the banner of migration control, it doesn’t take much to think a step further and imagine the representatives of this nomadology within the boundlessness that refugees and migrants embody. Identifying the refugee as the embodiment of the postmodern nomad, whose mere presence destabilises our supposed rootedness, is only a short step from longing for a figure of such strength to infiltrate our own lives. It is, I believe, within this vein that Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben’s proposal that we are all refugees can be read. He suggests that the possibility of the refugee exists in all of us and within this possibility there rests a revolutionary potential for the future of humankind. “In the context of the inexorable decline of the nation-state and the general corrosion of traditional legal-political categories the refugee is perhaps the only imaginable figure of the people in our day,” Agamben (1995: 114) writes.

The Love of Place

If the refugee has indeed turned into the only imaginable figure of our times, into a heroic fighter against the sadness of a world marked by territorial narrowness and exclusion, I wonder where this leaves Halima, who, against all the odds of such a world, keeps on climbing mountains. Does it turn her into another warrior, winding her way
through steep paths and undefined roads, a mountaineer of *open space*, defying any attempt to stop and settle down somewhere? Has she then, in other words, become a postmodern nomad, at home nowhere except within movement, always looking for greener pastures, the personification of my nomadic childhood dream?

In the work of many scholars writing on Somalis, the centrality of the nomadic feature of Somali identity is emphasised over and over. I.M. Lewis’ ethnographic work on pastoralists in North Somalia had set the tone. In his classic monograph *A Pastoral Democracy*, he describes Somali pastoralists as proud, freedom-loving nomads, as poetic desert warriors, who, despite constant battles over scarce resources and waterholes, resisted settling down and developing any spatial ties (Lewis 1961). This idea that Somalis can be characterised in terms of their mobility, their constant readiness to pack up camp and leave for greener pastures, has found its way (via Lewis) into the work of many contemporary texts on Somalis. In his study of Somalis in London, for example, David Griffiths stresses that nomadism is still a striking feature of their identities, and points at their high level of mobility (Griffiths 2002).

In her work on Somali refugees in the Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya, Cindy Horst uses the term “transnational nomads” to point towards the continuing importance of nomadic heritage for Somalis in the diaspora, a heritage that has changed and become largely transnational (Horst 2006). “As refugees, the Somalis have lost their homeland and the security of living in a place they can call their own” Horst (2006: 35) writes. “As ‘a nomadic people’, mobility, including the mobility that crosses borders, is and has always been an essential part of their livelihoods and identities.” She suggests that this nomadic mobility enables Somali refugees to rapidly change their strategies for survival and livelihood. This includes the possibility that if there are better options across the border, they will, just like nomadic herdsmen, quickly pack up and move towards greener pastures. Coming close to Deleuze and Guattari’s idea of nomadic warriors who do not fit within the spatial categorisation of the state, she suggests that with their diaspora mentality, Somali refugees pose a challenge to existing ideas of the nation-state (Horst 2006: 35). In Horst’s sense, Somali refugees could thus be described in terms of their double movement: as refugees and as carriers of a nomadic heritage that urges them to keep crisscrossing the world.
Halima’s stories create a more complex picture of the links between movement, self and place. Observing the sense of activity, of constant thinking and planning that characterised her everyday movements in Melbourne, I was struck by her tireless efforts to work towards a feeling of stability. Halima was always on the move, always planning or doing something. From the sewing group where she gathered Somali women to encourage them to think themselves beyond their duties as mothers and housewives, to the multicultural children’s playgroup in the community housing estates near Flemington where she spent a day a week, from the logistics of the Peace Project, to the primary school where, together with a group of five Somali women, she had taken over the school canteen, to her studies, to her plans to found her own NGO, there was always something that required her full attention. And yet, despite the ceaseless amount of activities that marked her days, despite her constant battle against clan rivalries that complicated her work, and despite the fact that most of her projects didn’t bring any income, Halima never complained. Instead, the sense of constant movement and activity was at the heart of her entire family. “This house feels like a bee hive,” I once said to Halima jokingly, “everyone’s always flying about.” Her husband, hearing my words, laughed. “Sister, look”, he said, “I’m an old man. If I sit down once I will stop completely.” “He’s right,” Halima agreed. “If I sit down and rest I will get sick. Besides, my heart never tells me to sit down. It tells me: ‘You know how you can help, your people need you.’”

Halima’s urge to keep moving, to help “her people”, and to find paths out of the isolation and loneliness many Somalis in Melbourne suffer from was much more than just a career opportunity. Building towards a greater sense of belonging in Australia within her community also allowed for her own attachment to grow and receive a place within a wider whole. Walking with her through Footscray’s Somali mall often felt like walking through a village. Everyone knew her and her family. And it was this feeling of familiarity, of knowing and being known by others, that drove her. “It is good to have them here,” she told me when I asked her how she felt about being known by everyone, which, at times, also made her an easy target for criticism from those who were jealous or disapproved of a woman publicly displaying such a strong and determined attitude. “They helped me a lot,” she said. “I feel like I have lots of relatives here. I am creating my own family around me.” As the stories of her childhood Mogadishu have shown, for
Halima the family is one of the key ingredients that make dwelling possible – so much so, that in her childhood stories the people who form the heart of the family and the place they inhabit seem to leak into each other and become one. In a similar way, the act of creating her own family with ‘her’ people can be seen as a means of actively building a place and a people to dwell in.

Halima’s climbing of mountains wasn’t out of a joy for movement or an unwillingness to be pinned down; instead, it was a constant movement towards the top, a smooth place, where, after all these years of struggle, she could finally rest and truly arrive. Getting so close to Halima compelled me to look beyond the metaphorical and figurative treatment of the refugee in terms of eternal mobility and into the actual experience of movement instead. It made me realise that despite its mobile and unsettling character, travelling is not about going anywhere, about moving between meaningless points on a map swallowed by the open space of the world. Instead, journeys always take us through places and in doing so they engage us in places (Casey 1993: 289). It seems to me that in the nomadic dream of the world it is exactly this engagement with place, this love of and for places, which is ignored in favour of a space of vast endlessness that allows us to fly through the human world, birdlike, observing it from a safe distance, without ever having to land and arrive somewhere.

In Katrine Nielsen’s research with Somalis in Denmark and the UK one of her interviewees mentioned a Somali proverb that also speaks for Halima’s urge to move forward: “Dhul Xiiso Kuuma Oga – ‘if you love a place, the place doesn’t love you’” (Nielsen 2004: 12). The proverb emphasises that place doesn’t necessarily offer an individual any opportunities but that the individual needs to leap into action to create these opportunities for herself. It is in exactly this way that Halima’s urge to keep on climbing mountains can be read. And it was within this lived tension between the need for movement and the need for attachment and stability that I was confronted with the necessity to question the bird’s eye view onto boundlessness and displacement.

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After twelve years in the Emirates they told me: “Your time is up. You have to leave the country now!” My daughter ran away when they said that they were
going to deport us. That’s when she met her husband and went to America with him. My other children decided to stay.

I sent the letters in which they were asking me to leave to my sister Sahra. She was already living in Melbourne. Her daughter had sponsored her to come from Kenya. When she arrived she tried to sponsor me to come as well, but they rejected it two times. When they said they would deport me, and when she saw that document she cried. She took all those documents to a local MP and said: “She used to be a big person. She used to be a Member of Parliament. If we send this person back they will kill her. She’s my sister, can you help me?” Immediately they sent me a sponsorship. She sponsored me, and that’s how I got here.

Before I came to this country, the government had told my sister: “We don’t have a home for Halima now, what can you do?” She said: “Don’t worry.” She went to her two daughters and sons who are working and said: “Everyone has to pay something for my sister’s house.” And then she rented a house, put everything inside for us and when I arrived she said: “This is your house, my sister.” Sahra helped me with every single step of my journey – until now.

And then, because of the tiredness, the years of worry inside me, and all the problems, I collapsed. I really, really collapsed. When I realised that I was settled, my body told me that I was so tired. That’s when I became very sick. I got a very rare blood disease, and I ended up in hospital. While I was in St. Vincent’s Hospital I prayed a lot and I said: “God, if you give me another chance, I will go and help our women, people like me, who suffered a lot. So please God, don’t make my time end today!”

While I was in the hospital, my sister Sahra was by my side, and she never left for a second. I remember when I was in the most critical state, I never heard one single word of what the doctors or other people said, but I used to hear my sister’s voice. She came early in the morning, combed my hair and cleaned my face. While she was doing that she was talking to me. She said: “Sister, you know what I am feeling? I feel that you will survive, you will wake up and you will help us – you always liked to help people, and I’m feeling that’s coming
soon. You are so beautiful, and I don’t want you to die. I am here for you. If you understand my words, please, sister, squeeze my hand.” So I squeezed her hand, and she jumped up and said: “My sister is ok!”

After I came out of hospital I started to cope and to understand the system. I organised a sewing program for Somali women. My community had asked me to run a program and Centacare\(^\text{29}\) said: “We will give a little funding for that, so she can run it.” At the same time I was still feeling very weak, so I received help from the public welfare. Then they sent me to the Commonwealth Rehabilitation Centre.

The people there were beautiful. They helped me a lot. They gave me courses and they were working hard to build my self-esteem. They advised me: “Halima, you can do more than you think. Don’t give up, life is not easy!” They listened to me, and I talked, talked, talked. I felt very comfortable with them. I felt they were near to my inside feelings. So that’s when I decided to go to university to study community development and welfare.

Around that time my husband joined us. He had found out where we were and contacted us. Immediately we decided to give him as much money as we had to bring him from Yemen to Kuala Lumpur. He stayed there for five years. He had been to lots of places. I wrote down our whole story, I sent it to the Immigration Department, they found out that it was true and let him come here.

I was at the airport when he arrived, and my family and all my kids and all my friends were with me. When I saw him I nearly collapsed, because I couldn’t understand his face. I said: “What happened to this world?” And then he came and he cried. He was praying a lot and he cried and cried.

I am a citizen of Australia now – like many other Somalis. But citizenship and settling in this country are two different things. Especially when people have gone through many hardships, they risk to always stay in transit. They say: “This is not my country,” because they didn’t get what they were expecting. But I want to cancel that word ‘transit’. In the end, no one is from here. Every person

\(^{29}\text{Centacare is an organisation funded by the Catholic Church in Melbourne that offers family services to people from diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds.}\)
has migrated here, except for the Aborigines, so why should I not also fit in this country? That’s what I’m fighting for. I don’t want to be in transit. My heart is working hard to settle, to settle and to belong to this country. I have my country, but if this war is not ending, I cannot lose my time for nothing, so I have something to do here - with people who are Somali and who live in peace here, but who have other problems.

We still have to settle and teach ourselves how to belong to this country, how to be a member of this community. No one is born into it, everyone else had to learn it too, so why not you?

That’s what I am exercising and doing my best for.

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The Horrors of Boundlessness

In 2006, when her husband was granted a humanitarian visa to join his family in Australia and, after years spent apart, could finally hold his wife and grown up children again, feelings of happiness, excitement and deep sadness overcame Halima all at once. During the times of struggle and hardship, neither of them had ever been willing to accept the idea that the other had died. The instability that came with being a refugee in countries that didn’t provide for their basic survival, the constant change of addresses and phone numbers and the immense strength that was needed to face the daily fear of deportation had foiled Halima’s earlier attempts to find out what had become of Mohamed. The moment she saw him entering the arrivals hall at Melbourne’s Tullamarine airport, she was shocked by the years of loneliness and hardship she could read from his face – a face that she felt she couldn’t understand anymore.

But when Mohamed arrived in Melbourne, this place he hadn’t really chosen, but that, due to an incredible range of twists and turns, had somehow chosen him, Halima made sure that he wasn’t going to drown in an alienating new world. In the months before his arrival she had carefully thought of ways to create an environment for him that would make his transition to a life in Melbourne and into a changed family as painless as possible.
Just as her sister Sahra had gone to great lengths to make her arrival in Melbourne as comfortable as possible, Halima felt that now she needed to do all she could to minimise the feeling of exhaustion and alienation she feared could overcome her husband after his resettlement. For it had been the moment of arriving, of realisation that the times of constant instability had come to an end, that had led Halima to “really, really collapse” soon after her own move to Melbourne. “I felt that if he came here and didn’t have a task he would get depressed and very sick,” Halima told me. And because she was still recovering from her own illness, she knew that she wouldn’t have the strength to face such difficulties. With these thoughts troubling her, she borrowed money from her sister and nephew and bought a shop, the milkbar at the corner of the street. “It was the first Somali milkbar Australia has ever seen,” she often joked. “When he arrived I gave him the keys. I said to him: ‘I created this for you, take it and I will help the community. Is that okay?’ He said: ‘That’s fantastic!’”

While grappling with the new situation, with the feeling of not just being a stranger in an unknown country but also within his own family, the task of running the small store helped Mohamed to come to terms with his new life. It was against the possibility of staying in a limbo, of getting caught in a paralysing sense of transit, that Halima wanted to protect herself and her family – and, in the end, the entire Somali community. After the frightening experience of her total collapse, it was in recognition of what Mammad Aidani (2010: 133) so poignantly describes as the “existential need of returning oneself to oneself”, that developing a love for Melbourne as a home was of crucial importance. In the context of Iranian refugees in Australia and their yearning to return to their homeland, Aidani stresses that their longing was not just directed towards returning to a place but also to themselves – to restoring their sense of self and their own identities. In Halima’s case, returning to a home in Somalia was no option. While many of her hopes and dreams here in Melbourne were directed to a future-Somalia where things will be better, she always told me that a return to Somalia seemed to be something so unrealistic and far away that she kept herself from hoping for it. Because of the ongoing clan conflicts in and around Mogadishu, and because of her former position in the Barre government, going back to Somalia was too dangerous. “Somalia is my country. I would love to be there with my people and I would like to help them,” Halima explained. “But after I saw how they were killing the educated people and how they
were fighting about all this tribal stuff, my heart stopped encouraging me to go back.” Close to Omar, who kept himself from indulging in thoughts about a past Somalia, Halima didn’t allow herself to become immersed in daydreams about its future.

While the refugees Aidani worked with linked the existential need of restoring themselves to an imaginary there (a homeland in Iran), Halima, for whom a return was no option, did the opposite: She tried to bring the there into the here. “Instead of risking myself by going back to Somalia I decided to help from here, to create the Peace Project and to help the orphans and little kids and their mothers from over here. That’s the only way I can support them,” Halima said. “The other thing is: My family is everywhere. Some are in Somalia, some are in Ethiopia, some are in Kenya, they are everywhere. So if Somalia settled down and became peaceful it would be good for my family to reunite again over there, but I think that needs a long time. It’s not now and it’s not near. Somalia needs time to settle down.”

Rather than longing for a return to Somalia, Halima was determined to invest her being-here with some of the thereness. When she was helping ‘her’ community here in Melbourne, it was also an attempt of healing their wounds. Halima’s community didn’t just involve her own clan or sub-clan. Instead, her work was marked by ceaseless attempts of rebuilding a sense of togetherness between the clans the war had destroyed. Rebuilding this sense of togetherness here in Melbourne, removed from the immediate violence of Mogadishu and determined by the settings of a new place, was essentially also a way of restoring herself. Close to Omar’s being-at-home within the ceaseless building towards a home, Halima’s building process involved her entire community and it involved a constant back and forth between the here and there.

This existential need for stability that speaks out of Halima’s story of her settlement in Australia, this urge of the heart to befriend Melbourne and to work against the threat of detachment, of “cancelling the word transit”, stand in stark contrast to the endless mobility and transition in terms of which Somalis are so often characterised. The idea of refugees as borderless nomadic beings might fit within my own fascination with boundlessness and non-belonging. But while Halima’s life story is marked by a high level of mobility, would describing her in terms of a deeply ingrained mentality of nomadic freedom not mean to reinscribe the exact state of uprootedness, which the anti-
sedentarist paradigm set out to fight against in the first place? For isn’t it exactly against this feeling of being caught in limbo, against the panicked fear of losing hold within the open-endedness of space that Halima’s heart is working hard to settle down – to settle down and to do so *in place*?

Perhaps it is time to re-think the current aversion to the idea of setting roots. While roots have come to stand for the postmodern “horror of being bound and fixed” (Bauman 1995: 91), this horror doesn’t seem to be shared by people like Halima, whose horror seems to be the exact opposite. Her horror is the horror of boundlessness; her fear is the fear to remain in transit and unfitting forever, to never arrive anywhere, to never be someone in relation to somewhere anymore. While Halima’s quite exceptional story cannot, of course, speak for the stories of the hundreds of thousands of other people who have experienced displacement (from Somalia and from elsewhere in the world), the majority of whom live in protracted situations and are forced to be mobile, I believe that her story still opens up a window to new views on displacement. Without having to argue *for* or *against* boundlessness, storytelling offers a way of exploring a more nuanced perspective, one that moves beyond the metaphorical. It allows us to not just question the way Somalis have come to be portrayed in terms of their nomadic heritage, but to also link this portrayal to wider questions of the homelessness of our time.

Halima’s insistence on the importance of place-bound stability and against a continuous state of limbo speaks for Nielsen’s (2004: 14) position that many scholars working with the concept of Somali nomadism fail to take into account the context of what they perceive as nomadic movement. As Nielsen points out, the type of movement that drives Somali refugees from country to country takes place out of necessity and not for pure joy of movement (Nielsen 2004: 16). In fact, the context of such movement couldn’t be more different from the idea of travelling light. For against the romantic dream of Somalis as boundless nomads, as world travellers who do not have the need to belong anywhere, stand the horrors and violence of an age that Somali intellectual Ahmed Samatar has described as *qaxootin*. It is an age of desperate exodus, the magnitude of which can only be described as a “catastrophe”. The rupture in the collective identity is so severe, Samatar writes, “that Somalis have taken almost *any* road out of the country” (Samatar, A.I. 2004: 10). Those who are leaving Somalia come from all different categories – “men and women, old and young, poor and not so poor,
statesmen and the ordinary, educated and uneducated, urban and rural”. And, as Samatar writes, although many Somalis hope and yearn for a better Somalia, many are so disheartened that they don’t see hope for a return some time soon.

While Halima doesn’t have the hope to return to Somalia, this doesn’t lead her to question Mogadishu as the home-place she so beautifully storied at the beginning of this chapter. Being displaced doesn’t automatically lead to the feeling that any and no place in the world is home or that, in the end, being on the move itself is home. Instead, as Halima put it in her story, her “heart is working hard to belong” – it is working towards a stability and rootedness in place, towards a re-grounding of the self and towards an end of the restlessness that accompanied the years on the move.

### From Routes to Roots

Despite my fascination with travel and boundlessness, with movement and fluctuation, I have a terrible fear of flying. While I still force myself to take a plane whenever it isn’t avoidable, the state of detachedness and floatation through space and time evokes in me a feeling of panic. It is the moment when the plane takes off that terrifies me, when I literally lose ground and have to submit myself to the rules of this strange spatial machine and give in to a sensation of utter placelessness. When lived to its extreme, my dream of not having to set anchors anywhere within this free-floating human world thus turns into its vast opposite: a nightmare of losing grip on myself within the incomprehensibility of open space.

It is against this nightmare that Halima steels herself and that her heart keeps on working. And while Halima’s everyday paths in Melbourne were marked by a remarkable level of mobility, this mobility was not, by any means, boundless. Instead, the movements in Melbourne that I shared with Halima took place within routes that were tied to the boundaries of the western suburbs, the boundaries within which she felt safe and homely. The occasional event that forced her to drive her car beyond the imagined border formed by her sister’s house in Kensington, led her to feel insecure, to agonise over the unknown streets, places and people she would be confronted with.
Halima often relied on the support of her son and nephews to drive her to places beyond the boundaries of where she felt at home.

This attachment to her suburb, neighbours and everyday trajectories had indeed become so strong that when, after years of waiting for public housing, Halima finally received an apartment, she turned down the offer because the allocated house was too far away from the neighbourhood she had grown so fond of. Her neighbours, many of whom were Italian, were happy to hear that she wouldn’t leave. Over the years the people in her street had become close to each other. That her refusal threw her back into a long waiting list for public housing and that it could take years for another offer to come up didn’t bother Halima. “If I have to wait ten years I don’t mind,” she said. “I don’t want to go to another place, I really like this area.”

Halima’s desire to stay put and her eagerness to work towards a feeling of being-at-home in Australia again throws the romantic imagination of the world as boundless and the refugee as the embodiment of nomadic belonging into question. Rather, her desire turns the gaze from the figure of the refugee back to those who came to imagine them as emissaries of a homeless age of movement. Looking at refugees, migrants and other mobile peoples in terms of a placeless paradigm doesn’t just neglect their actual experiences and lives. It also keeps us from having a serious look into the ways this paradigm has been formed and into the reason why movement has come to be a symbol of such strength. It keeps us from understanding what, in the end, all these metaphors, symbols and representations really stand for.

In an article laconically titled ‘From Roots to Routes: Tropes for Trippers’, Jonathan Friedman takes a critical look at a dominant stream of thinkers in anthropology such as Appadurai, Gupta and Ferguson, Malkki and Clifford, who, over the past three decades, have confronted ideas of boundedness and territoriality (Friedman 2002). Friedman points out how proponents of a placeless paradigm have sketched dwelling as something that was the premise of classical anthropology, where culture and bounded territoriality were seen as a given. The opposite of this view, the idea that displacement is at the heart of the human condition, has now become so accepted in anthropology that much of it has, in fact, turned into a cliché: “[I]deas of locality, of place, of community are miserably innocent of the realities of movement, of the transnational and
transcultural.” But is there really a contradiction we can speak of? “Is the assumption of locality in error merely because there has always been contact?” Friedman (2002: 23) asks.

Despite the fact that estrangement and nomadic roaming might so well capture a certain discontent with the state of the world and (post)modernity, I agree with Friedman that the strong focus on fluidity and instability seems to overlook the way place continues to be of importance in people’s everyday lives. While compared to one hundred or two hundred years ago, the world is more mobile than ever, the actual percentage of people on the move internationally is very low compared to those who stay put. And while our own experiences as anthropologists might be unbounded and unsettled this doesn’t mean that place, roots and settlement have ceased to be of importance altogether. In fact, I question the proposition that they have ceased to be of importance to those who celebrate non-belonging. The danger of using displacement as a trope through which the postmodern can be understood is that it quickly disintegrates into a flirting with uncertainty and mobility. Again, there would be a necessity to look beyond the uncritical use of movement as a metaphor and into the actual experience of the phenomenon. As Dick Pels argues, construing the migrant, exile or nomad as alter ego of the modern intellectual, can lead to an “intellectualist domestication and appropriation of the experiences of ‘real-life’ migrants and exiles, while it simultaneously euphemizes the comparatively settled, sedentary and privileged position of academics, who are invited to indulge in fictions of social ‘weightlessness’ and dreams of perpetual transcendence in boundary-breaking journeys of the critical mind” (Pels 1999: 72). This is not to suggest that displacement is an experience unique to refugees or migrants. Rather, it is a call to take displacement seriously, to not overlook the placement in displacement.

To look beyond the flimsy, the fluid and the unstable, thus involves looking into the lived experience of being-in-place. In Halima’s case, her movement away from Somalia and towards years of uncertainty was not a chosen step. It was an existential decision, one between life and death. Once on the move, however, she needed to keep going, for there was no place for her to rest and put down roots. This continuous mobility that marked her years of flight and asylum was not a desirable condition. It was, in fact, a condition that put such heavy strains upon her that it caused Halima to get seriously ill
as soon as she “found herself settled” after her move to Australia. And it is against this debilitating state of liminality and instability that Halima’s heart keeps on working hard and attaches itself to the place where, after years of climbing, her feet well and truly felt ground again.

This isn’t to suggest that the climbing has come to an end now or that it will ever come to an end – for Halima or for any other living being. But it suggests that the act of climbing itself doesn’t mean that the paths she takes and the ground she touches are mere backdrops to an endless vastness of space. If place is so deeply ingrained in our bodies and minds, if there is no outside of place, its neglect doesn’t just throw the existence of the world as we see and experience it but our entire sense of being into question. Although places change and the universe might stretch into endlessness, the fact remains that humans have to deal with the limits of being-in-the-world from the places their bodies are currently positioned at. While being here, they can dream the rhythms of somewhere else – a somewhere else that is perhaps so far removed from the here that it appears to be lost in open space. In the end, not even the nomad travels routeless (or perhaps better: rootless) – quite the opposite, nomads need to be able to read and understand places better than anyone else. Without a deep knowledge for places, their characteristics and seasonal behaviour, the nomad would be truly lost.

I suggest that movement has to be thought of as two-fold: inwards and outwards. The inwards movement is the motion within an individual, experienced as the sense that one is existentially moving forwards, that one isn’t treading water, or that one isn’t, as in Halima’s fears, caught in transit. It is the movement Omar described when he stressed that the need to travel usually doesn’t arise out of a pure joy for movement. Rather, people travel in order to achieve more and to change something in their lives. It is a movement that also propels people like me, the student-anthropologist, to come to the other end of the world to learn and see new things and by doing so to create a movement inside of me. The outwards movement, then, is the physical movement, the movement that actually brings us to move about and go to other places. These two movements balance each other. If the need to existentially move forward is satisfied, then the need for a movement outwards isn’t of such importance. If, however, the need for inwards movement is marked by stagnation, then the need to move outwards grows.
It is close to what, in the context of Lebanese migrants, Ghassan Hage (2005: 470) has called “existential mobility”, a need to “move physically so we can feel that we are existentially on the move again or at least moving better”. Looking at movement by taking the relationship between existential and physical movement into account, could allow for a new anthropological take on movement. According to Hage, it would “allow us construct a whole social physics of socio-existential mobility, explaining different kinds of mobility rather than homogenizing them with one term that equates the travel of the totally-at-home-having-fun tourist to the travel of the fragile, dislocated and hesitant refugee” (Hage 2005: 471).

For Halima, the inwards movement is marked by her ceaseless moves to belong. It is marked by her continuous struggle to make Melbourne a home to her community – a community that, itself, is a form of dwelling. In the end, the very act of building, of working-towards, of actively engaging with one’s surroundings, needs to be understood as a form of emplacement. As Heidegger notes, to build in itself is already to dwell, and even when we turn inwards we never abandon our stay among things (Heidegger 1975: 146, 157). Because being-in-the-world is essentially a staying with things, inwards movement can take us to imagined and storied places, and yet never make us lose ourselves in the vastness of open space. Rather, these imagined, storied places come to permeate the here and now. They come to enter our continuous acts of building and with it mould our stay with things and in the end, our very emplacement.
V

Conclusion
This thesis ends as it began: with the image of a path and the stories it weaves into the viewer’s imagination. This photograph depicts another crossroads. As a point where some things pause, rest or halt and others mingle, melt or begin, it can tell us stories about the meanings of endings, boundaries and horizons. It establishes an idea of the place-world, and of people’s continuous movements towards emplacement within it.

Mohamed and I never talked much about this image. Yet, like all his photographs – like any image, indeed – it didn’t require many words. Seeing, as John Berger (2008: 1) has observed, comes before words. It is through seeing that we establish our place in the world: “[W]e explain that world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it”, he writes.

The image depicts a deserted road in the centre of Mogadishu, leading towards the parliament – a building that, as Mohamed told me, is crumbling under the weight of
years of war. What once was the heart of Somalia as a modern nation state now looks deserted. “Some time ago there probably used to be a guard at the gate,” Mohamed said. “It’s very sad, very sad.” This sense of sadness doesn’t need to be verbalised in more detail. The image says it all. The sadness appears through the cracked road, the derelict building and the absence of any sign of living beings inhabiting this place – as if the photographer, following the many people who have already left the city, were about to go through the gate and took one last look at what he was leaving behind. Without people walking, talking or simply living the place’s being-here, the viewer’s attention is drawn to boundaries: the endless row of white walls on the right; the sequence of windowless buildings on the left; the blueness of the sky over and above and across, criss-crossed by power lines in the distance; and in the midst of it all is the inescapable presence of the gate, the ultimate attempt to keep things within bounds.

As much as the image seems to depict an endpoint, it does not exclude new possibilities. Not all is lost; not all is drenched in sadness. After all, the gate is open, allowing the viewer of the photograph to imagine herself walking towards the openness of the blue sky. Rather than speaking of the boundary as a totality at which things stop, the photograph hints at the boundary – in Heidegger’s sense – at which things begin their presencing. Such an understanding of bounding allows for place to be looked at in terms of its openness and potentialities, as “that for which room has been made”, rather than as something enclosed within itself (Heidegger 1975: 154). Despite all the sadness, the displacements and corrosion that speak through it, Mohamed’s image also allows for hope: for imagining new paths to be walked, forgotten directions to be uncovered and unexpected clearings to open up. Literally and symbolically, the photo makes room for change and, perhaps, future emplacements.

When he first returned from his journey, I asked Mohamed whether he had felt relieved to leave the war-torn city and all its problems behind. “You see, that’s it,” he responded. “I was not happy at all to leave that place.” His sense of attachment to the place blotted out memories of the dangers of walking through the streets of Mogadishu, and the feelings of estrangement and ambiguity it created. It was only by being there, Mohamed explained to me, that he began to understand that he had actually been homesick for Mogadishu all those years. Led by this strong sense of attachment that came to the fore
during his first visit in 2011, Mohamed has since returned to Mogadishu and other parts of Somalia several times.

With all its problems, its evidence of suffering and abandonment and his own journeys away from it, Mogadishu has not lost its presence in Mohamed’s life. As all the wonderful photographs that have formed crossroads within this thesis show, the line between emplacement and displacement is, at times, so thin that they cannot easily be separated. While displacement, this stinging pain of being lost to or within a place, often seems to have the louder voice, Mohamed’s photographs also speak of people’s enduring relationships with places – even if at first glance these places might seem utterly lost to them. Notwithstanding the years of war and violence that have left their imprint on Mogadishu and its inhabitants, it is still home to many people. Be it through the persistence of memory places, imaginary past or future landscapes, or the transforming power of stories, as living, breathing, walking and seeing human beings we employ manifold ways to come to terms with the inescapable fact of our being-here.

**Ways of Being-Here**

This thesis has also been a journey that allowed me to begin to grasp my own being-here. Becoming so closely involved in Halima’s, Mohamed’s and Omar’s lives and observing their movements towards emplacement confronted me with the necessity to look at my own refusal to be pinned down. It urged me to look into the places and people that moulded me and to understand the reasons behind my rejection of Heimat and my confusion over the idea of ‘home’. It led me to move beyond the metaphorical use of the figure of the refugee as a representative for an age of deterritorialisation and pay attention to the roots of this perceived homelessness, which, in the end, is a chosen homelessness.

Listening to Omar’s stories of home-building and observing Halima’s urge to keep climbing mountains in order to arrive and settle down, made me realise that the feeling of the restlessness of our times needs to be read in the context of a wider narrative of placelessness that can be traced back to modern Western conceptualisations of the world. The turn towards space has left the human subject moving back and forth within
the vastness of the universe without any abiding place to rest and take root or dwell. My own romanticisation of travelling, non-belonging and movement, it seems, stems from a muddled understanding of space as marked by a sheer infinity of possibilities and place as the embodiment of claustrophobic closeness. Coming to Australia and listening to Omar’s and Halima’s stories made me understand that while there are good reasons to choose to be at home within a sense of movement and non-belonging, there is an urgent need to look beyond the conceptual and the metaphorical and into the way being-at-home or being-without-home are actually made sense of in people’s everyday lives. Omar, Halima and Mohamed urged me to see the paradoxical ways in which Dasein (being) is always grounded and on the move at the same time. For what is so baffling and somewhat mysterious about being is, as John Berger (1984: 41) has suggested, “that it represents both stillness and movement”.

Omar’s and Halima’s stories have shown that this groundedness of Dasein as being-here cannot be circumvented by ignoring place and reducing space to a purely mathematical essence. Omar’s numerous acts of home-building, and Halima’s tireless climbing of mountains in order to move actively towards emplacement, illustrate the importance of place in people’s lives. Even in the face of the disorienting feeling of displacement, and despite years spent on the move or caught in limbo, the intimacy and immediacy of place isn’t swallowed by the endlessness of space. Halima’s and Omar’s stories have opened up the possibility of understanding human emplacement as located at the crossroads between the closedness of place and the infinity of the universe. “The world is wholly inside and I am wholly outside myself”, Merleau-Ponty (2003: 474) says, describing the inward and outward directions of our emplacement in the world. Place, his comment suggests, is not just where we are. It is something surrounding, yet not immovable, it is something imagined, yet material, and it something that gathers, yet also disseminates.

The stories in this thesis say much about being emplaced as being inward and outward bound at the same time. Through movement, by arriving in Melbourne and befriending Australians, and by returning to the place he had left behind so many years ago, Omar began to look at the places he had inhabited in a new light. By seeing Melbourne and Gardo from the perspective of the larger place-world, he saw himself in new ways. In Halima’s stories, her being-at-home in faith created a feeling of being-part-of the
universe and allowed her to carry this sense of home with her wherever she went. In my own case, coming to Australia and being-here with Halima, Mohamed, Omar and all the other people I have met in Melbourne, made me look back at the place I had come from and see my homelessness in a new light. These stories suggest that emplacement, the acts of investing our surroundings with meaning, is of fundamental importance because places are not mere backdrops against which life is written. Rather, it is in our (daily or not-so-daily) journeys through places that our lives take shape and that we make sense of the wider world – and perhaps even the universe.

Rather than thinking of emplacement as immovable, it is, in fact continuously changing and moving. We develop a deep attachment to certain places, but as Halima and my own experiences of looking up into a starlit sky suggest, against the infinity of the universe the groundedness of these places and our own emplacements within them become destabilised. At the same time, by telling stories, by making sense of the universe, by giving stars a name and identity, we story vastness back into something placeable and meaningful. Like Rilke’s *Weltinnenraum*, where birds fly silently through us and all beings are shot through with immensity, emplacement as inwards and outwards bound allows us to reach outwards, to let the world touch us, and, at the same time, story this immensity into something intimate and dear.

The importance of the openness of emplacement is mirrored in Omar’s and Halima’s home-building processes. Omar’s stories suggest that in order to feel at home a place needs to be open enough to perceive opportunities to move forward in one’s life. Halima’s and Omar’s efforts to invest their surroundings with meaning and their continuous processes of home-building, also hint at the close relationship between place, building and dwelling. Omar’s story of emplacement suggests that the very act of building can be a form of dwelling. By becoming actively engaged in his surroundings, by laying brick upon brick towards a sense of home, he was able to invest a place with meaning. Halima’s urge to keep moving forward and make Australia a meaningful place for her community enabled her to gradually overcome the debilitating feelings of displacement and to become emplaced. Both Halima and Omar developed deep emotional and social ties by entering into a productive relationship with the places they inhabited.
I suggest that the affinity between building and dwelling that can be observed in Halima’s and Omar’s stories is not specific to them. As Heidegger points out, the Old English and High German word for building, the term buan, literally means to dwell, or to stay in a place (Heidegger 1975: 146). Moving from the original meaning of the term buan (now ‘bauen’ or ‘building’), which was ‘to dwell’, to the question what ich bin (I am) means, Heidegger points out that the term bin also relates to the old word bauen: ich bin, or du bist (I am, you are) means ‘I dwell’ or ‘you dwell’: “The way in which you are and I am, the manner in which we humans are on the earth, is Buan, dwelling. To be a human being means to be on earth as a mortal. It means to dwell.” (Heidegger 1975: 147)

There is no being outside place. That doesn’t mean that place is confined to and within itself; just as being is continuously on the move – it is always a way of becoming – emplacement can only be understood in terms of people’s movements towards it. Halima’s stories of the ‘fantastic days’ in the Mogadishu of her childhood suggest that these movements-towards, these manifold acts of building, often involve the traces of places from the past. Especially in the face of displacement, these memory places can write a place’s habits and inner workings so deeply into our innermost landscapes that they can become a means for making sense of our present surroundings. Halima’s stories also show that these imaginary layers, which can pave the way towards emplacement, shouldn’t be too readily discarded as nostalgia. Just like place, nostalgia needs to be understood in new ways, reflecting the act that people use idealised or imagined stories of past places as a means of making sense of their being-here. The idea of the past as something long gone may therefore need to be challenged. The past, Halima’s experiences show, is not a foreign country; it is relevant and present for the here and now, and continues to play into and form our lifeworlds.

Omar’s and Halima’s stories also show that there is a limit to memory’s ability to guide and transform present emplacements. Omar couldn’t look back into a past Somalia yet disregard all that had happened to it ever since he left. He found it hard to find words for a place that, as he put it, had literally crumbled into dust, and in fact refused to indulge in memories of a beautiful past. While Halima could gain strength from looking back to the ‘fantastic days’ of her childhood, her memories were sometimes interrupted by the painful realisation of all that was lost. Memory places do not only bring back to
life beautiful and light moments, but can also take us back to places that have undergone such violent ruptures that we struggle to experientially make sense of them and integrate them into our being-here. This, it seems, is the pain of displacement.

As Halima’s sadness over the papaya’s lack of sweetness and the memories of pain and loss it provoked show, displacement can literally get under our skins and be felt in our bodies. At such moments, creating a story can become almost impossible. Neither Halima nor Omar were left mute, however: in trying to tell their stories, they deployed other forms of expression. By telling me detailed stories in which he pieced together Somalia’s past, Omar was also making sense of it. Through the soothing rhythm of the poem and the protective boundaries of the fragment, Halima could tell me of things that were otherwise untellable. While storytelling and displacement can sometimes be experienced as opposing forces, it is important to double-listen and recognise the different expressions of ‘displaced stories’. Such stories can, for example, be uttered as whispers, fragments or half-told stories. Sometimes, as Halima’s story showed, they can also take on the form of heroic tales that turn losses into wins.

Storytelling, then, is the meeting point between past and present; it is another crossroad at which places and memories from the past and impressions and experiences from the present begin to leak into each other. It is at this point, where the importance of the imaginary comes to the fore, that Casey’s strong emphasis on the inseparable relationship between bodies and places can be loosened and opened up towards the imaginary. Where Casey, in focusing on the importance of the lived body, emphasises the way place is experienced immediately as Erlebnis, Omar’s, Halima’s and my own stories suggest that place is also experienced as Erfahrung, that is, in terms of the reflected imaginary and storied layers that form it into something meaningful. This, in turn, suggests that experience itself needs to be understood as more than mere immediate, bodily and sensory (absolute) hereness, and that our engagement with the world always involves different layers of experience.

In order to grasp the way place is experienced, we need to take into account all the political, historical, social, sensual and storied elements that shape our experiences of it. The interplay of power dynamics and place that has dominated so much modern thinking and writing on space and place is but one of the many layers that form people’s
place-experience. As Omar’s accidental arrival in Australia shows, the state’s attempt to control who is allowed in and who has to stay out can make borders and boundaries felt in people’s lives and bodies, but doesn’t stop them from outwitting the state in its urge to control and define places. This, again, hints at the essentially moving character of place, at the way people and places are continuously changing. It also suggests that place is not just a social or political construct. Because the social does not exist prior to place and it isn’t given expression except in and through place or spatialised ordering, it is perhaps, as Jeff Malpas (1999: 36) has suggested, only within the structure of place that the possibility of the social arises.

The different ways of being-here that wove their ways through this thesis illuminate the all-encompassing importance of togetherness in our continuous struggle for emplacement. When Omar, living in an exclusionary society, decided to live one-eyed and to keep himself from experiencing the place in all its dimensions, he did so to protect himself against the painful reality of a place that marked him as an outsider. A place whose meanings he couldn’t share and live as part of a wider whole refused emplacement. Halima’s stories gave a strong sense of the way place and people leak into each other and can almost feel as one – be it through the importance of the family as the core theme of dwelling, the ways her personal suffering became embedded in the suffering of a humanised country, or her urge to create a feeling of being-at-home within her community. Human beings are born of and into the world; they dwell in each other, and together they dwell in place.

Towards the Open

At this point, so close to letting this thesis and the story-journeys within them come to an end, I would like to return to Tim Ingold’s wayfarer who, in travelling over land, cannot but engage with the places her movements take her through. While it is her body that takes her through these places, it is the stories she tells about them that define her experience and understanding of them. “Inhabitant knowledge” is how Ingold (2009: 41-43) has called this form of knowledge, which is built on the practical understanding of the lifeworld, an understanding that is integrated on the way and that is “meshworked”, rather than networked (Ingold 2009: 41). Because wayfarers inhabit the
world rather than travel across it, and because for inhabitants things are not classified as
facts but narrated as stories, it is not just the body but our very imagination that plays
into our ways of travelling through and experiencing place. Every place, Ingold (2009:
41) suggests, as a gathering of things, is a knot of stories.

This thesis has created such a knot of stories: a gathering place for understanding the
world on the way (unterwegs). Becoming involved in Halima’s and Omar’s lives and
listening to each other’s stories enabled me to look at place from an inhabitant’s point of
view rather than trying to explain it by classifying it. By becoming Omar’s friend and
Halima’s daughter, my research became a project of talking and seeing the world on the
way, and doing so together. In storying these paths together, it became clear that neither
the places we were moving through nor the world we were trying to grasp were
enclosed islands at risk of drowning in the open space of an unplaceable universe.
Rather than movements across an indifferent, open space, ours were movements
through bounded yet open places. The open I have in mind here is the openness hinted
at by the crossroads in Mohamed’s photograph. It is the openness of the horizon, which
encloses and uncloses at the same time and which leads me at once out of this thesis and
right into its very heart.

I would like to end with the idea of a crossroads that points towards the openness with
which the stories and images shared here have spoken about place and life and the
world. Das Offene, which Rilke so masterfully spoke about in his Duino Elegies,
captures our continuous back and forth movements between captivity and freedom,
movement and stagnation, inside and outside. Just as seeing comes before words, poetry
can be a way of seeing through words; it is therefore fitting that this last crossroads is
formed in the words of one of my favourite poets.

And we: spectators, always, everywhere,
looking at everything, never from!
It floods us. We arrange it. It decays.
We arrange it again, and we decay.

Who has turned us around like this,
so that, whatever we do, we always have
the look of someone going away? Just as a man
on the last hill showing him his whole valley
one last time, turns and stops and lingers –
so we live, and are forever leaving. 30

30 Rainer Maria Rilke (2005: 59), from the eighth of his Duino Elegies (translation by A. Poulin).
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Appendix

Chronology of Events

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Events in Somali History</th>
<th>Key Events in Halima’s, Omar’s and Mohamed’s Lives</th>
<th>Key Events in Author’s Life related to the Research</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9th/10th century: Migration of people from Aden to ports along Somali coast</td>
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<td>14th century: Mogadishu is first mentioned in a document.</td>
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<td>Mid-18th century: Establishment of the Majerteen sultanate Migiurtinia in the Puntland area where Omar was born. At its height in the 19th century, the sultanate’s control reached as far as central Somalia.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mid-19th century: Expeditions by French and British explorers to southern and northern parts of Somalia, delivering detailed information on the country and its people to Europeans</td>
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<td>1897: Division of Somalia between five colonial powers (England, Italy, France, Kenya and Ethiopia). The French establish a trading centre and coaling station in Djibouti, the British found British Somaliland in the North and the Italians aim to establish a settler colony and to develop commercial enterprises along the Juba and Shabeelie rivers. Ethiopia under Menelik II begins to extend its territory over Somali lands that they claim once belonged to Ethiopia.</td>
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<td>1900-1920: Anti-colonial (‘holy’) war against British, Italian and Ethiopian forces in the Puntland area led by Sayid Maxamed Cabdille Xassan</td>
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<td>1923: Cesare Maria De Vecchi Di Val Cismon, a close associate of Mussolini, becomes the new governor of Somalia Italiana. He brings the northern Majerteen sultanate under close control and begins to terrorise and control the population.</td>
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**1936**: Confrontation between Italy and Somalia over the Ogaden region, peaking with the two countries clashing in WWII

**1940**: Italians drive British colonisers out of Somaliland and assume control over the area.

**1941**: British defeat Italians and establish administrative control that covers the entire Somali region, excluding Djibouti.

**1943**: Formation of the Somali Youth League (SYL) marking the beginning of the struggle for national independence

**1940-1959**: Ten year UN mandate for Italy to administer Somalia’s South. Gradual development of self-governed Somali institutions in British Somaliland.

**1960**: British and Italian Somaliland gain independence and become unified Republic of Somalia.

**1960-1969**: Two Somali governments are elected and formed, struggling to balance power dynamics between different clans and fractions. Strengthening of pan-Somali forces and their attempts to unify all Somali-inhabited areas.

**1969**: Military coup led by Major General Mohamed Siyaad Barre and foundation of the socialist Somali Democratic Republic. Beginning of Somalia’s close involvement with USSR.

**Early 1970s**: National literacy campaigns and economic developments plans embracing “scientific socialism”

**1970s**: Halima is amongst the few chosen to be educated at the High Komsomol School, an elite cadre training institution of the Soviet Union’s Communist Party. Upon returning to Mogadishu, she becomes the youngest Member of Parliament.

**1972-1978**: Widespread famine in Somalia, which displaces many northern Somali nomads. Continuous border clashes between Somalia and Ethiopia resulting in a war with disastrous consequences for Somalia after

**1976**: Omar moves to Mogadishu and begins to study fisheries.

**Late 1970s**: Halima marries and her first child Sahra is born.
its defeat. USSR opts to help Ethiopia and Somalia turns to USA for help. Influx of hundreds of thousands of refugees from Ethiopian Ogaden region.

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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
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<tr>
<td>1980s</td>
<td>Formation of oppositional guerrilla forces, such as Somali National Movement, United Somali Congress and Somali Salvation Democratic Front, organised along clan lineages. Beginning of Siyaad Barre’s hard-line stance against oppositional clans.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>Mohamed leaves Somalia and migrates to Australia. He goes to university in Melbourne and gets married.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983</td>
<td>Omar leaves Somalia and migrates to Saudi Arabia.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>Annika is born in Eindhoven in the Netherlands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>Mass upheaval in the North against increasing repression of the Isaaq clans. Barre reacts by ordering the bombardment of the cities of Hargeisa and Burco.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>Siyaad Barre’s government is overthrown by guerrillas from the United Somali Congress and chased out of Mogadishu. This is followed by a period of clan-cleansing and mass violence spreading throughout the country. With the collapse of a centrally organised government, warlords take over. In the north, along the borders of the former British Protectorate, the SNM proclaims the Republic of Somaliland. Somaliland presents itself as an independent state, claiming international recognition of its independence from Somalia.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>Halima and her family are forced to flee Mogadishu. She loses contact with her husband and embarks on a long journey that takes her through many countries and ends in the United Arab Emirates. Omar’s family is displaced by the war. He goes to Kenya to monitor their situation and manages to receive humanitarian visas for his mother and several other family members who are subsequently allowed to settle in Melbourne. In the same year, Omar meets his future wife. Mohamed’s family is forced to flee Somalia. His elderly parents and his brothers and sisters are resettled in Australia.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>According to the census, 361 Australian residents were born in Somalia.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992-1995</td>
<td>Several interventions by the UN and the US in a bid to battle against famine and restore peace. The US-led operation Restore Hope fails when guerrilla forces shoot down several Black Hawk helicopters, forcing US President Clinton to withdraw all troops.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>Omar’s first child is born. He begins working as a taxi-driver in Melbourne.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>Annika’s family moves to Millstatt, her father’s childhood village.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Political leaders in the northeast of the country negotiate a peace agreement between the different clans. Based on an alliance of different Darood/Harti sub-clans.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Omar turns his back on the taxi industry and goes back to university.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Puntland declares itself an autonomous state. Unlike Somaliland, however, it still regards itself as part of the Somali state and works towards rebuilding the Somali government.

**2000-2005**: A transitional Somali government is appointed at peace talks in Djibouti. As the new political leaders are not accepted by the warlords who by now control Mogadishu, a new transitional federal government is put together with the strong involvement of the European Union by appointing warlords to political positions. The new government is unable establish control over Mogadishu and can only operate from an outpost in the town of Baidoa.

**2002**: After finishing school, Annika moves to Vienna to study social anthropology. As part of her Master’s thesis she conducts fieldwork amongst Somali asylum seekers in Italy and becomes involved in the lives of two Somali men who tell her about their experiences as boat refugees and their times in Italian detention centres.

**2003-2005**: After being threatened with deportation by Emirati officials, Halima’s sister Sahra succeeds with her third application for their resettlement to Australia. Halima settles down in Melbourne and manages to overcome a serious illness. She finds out about her husband’s whereabouts.

**2006-2011**: Numerous attacks and moves to assume control over Mogadishu by militia forces of the Islamic Courts Union. These attempts are countered by military invasions led by the Ethiopian and Kenyan armies. By August 2011, most Islamist militias are forced to retreat from Mogadishu.

**2006-2011**: Halima’s husband is granted a humanitarian visa and the family is reunited. Halima begins her work with the Somali community and goes back to university to study community development. Omar founds the NGO Horn Afrik and also begins to work with the Somali community in Melbourne. Mohamed becomes involved in the transitional Somali government’s attempts to rebuild the country. He takes on the role of an advisor to the minister of telecommunication. In 2011, Mohamed returns to Mogadishu for the first time in thirty years.

**2009**: Annika receives a scholarship to do a PhD and moves to Melbourne. 
**Early 2010**: Annika meets Mohamed. They soon establish a friendship and begin to meet regularly. Mohamed introduces her to the ‘Somali mall’ and other places in Melbourne where Somalis like to gather. 
**Late 2010**: Annika meets Omar and begins working with him on his life story. 
**Early 2011**: Annika meets Halima and begins working with her on her life story.

**2011**: The census reveals that 5687 Somali-born people live in Australia. More than half of them live in Victoria.

**2012**: The Somali government drafts a new constitution, aiming at a centrally governed system, and all ministers and departments return to Mogadishu. Abdi Farah Shirdon is appointed as Somalia’s new Prime Minister.

**2012**: Omar returns to Puntland for the first time in thirty years. Mohamed travels to Somalia on several occasions and documents the first signs of Mogadishu’s recovery from decades of war and violence.

**2012**: Throughout the year, Annika has numerous meetings with Halima and Omar to work with them on their life stories. At the same time, the writing-up stage of the stories begins. By the end of the year, they receive drafts of chapters, and their comments and feedback are subsequently worked into the written representation of their life stories.
Ethics Clearance and Statement of Compliance

To: Prof K Neumann ISR-LSS; Ms Annika Lems

Dear Prof Neumann and Ms Lems,

**SUHREC Project 2010/135 African refugees' ideas of space, place and belonging**

Approved Duration 27/08/2010 To 27/08/2012 [Adjusted]

I refer to the ethical reviews of the above project protocol undertaken by Swinburne's Human Research Ethics Committee (SUHREC). Your response to the review, as e-mailed on 20/27 August 2010, were put to and approved by a SUHREC delegate.

I am pleased to advise that, as submitted to date, the project has approval to proceed in line with standard on-going ethics clearance conditions here outlined.

- All human research activity undertaken under Swinburne auspices must conform to Swinburne and external regulatory standards, including the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research and with respect to secure data use, retention and disposal.

- The named Swinburne Chief Investigator/Supervisor remains responsible for any personnel appointed to or associated with the project being made aware of ethics clearance conditions, including research and consent procedures or instruments approved. Any change in chief investigator/supervisor requires timely notification and SUHREC endorsement.

- The above project has been approved as submitted for ethical review by or on behalf of SUHREC. Amendments to approved procedures or instruments ordinarily require prior ethical appraisal/ clearance. SUHREC must be notified immediately or as soon as possible thereafter of (a) any serious or unexpected adverse effects on participants and any redress measures; (b) proposed changes in protocols; and (c) unforeseen events which might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project.

- At a minimum, an annual report on the progress of the project is required as well as at the conclusion (or abandonment) of the project.

- A duly authorised external or internal audit of the project may be undertaken at any time.
Please contact me if you have any queries about the ethical review process, citing the SUHREC project number. Copies of clearance emails should be retained as part of project record-keeping.

Best wishes for the project.

Yours sincerely

Ann Gaeth
for Keith Wilkins
Secretary, SUHREC

To: Prof K Neumann ISR-LSS; Ms Annika Lems

SUHREC Project 2010/135 African refugees' ideas of space, place and belonging

Approved Duration Extended to 30/04/2013

Thank you for the progress report received on 30 November 2012 which included a request to extend ethics clearance for the above project. The report/request was put to the Acting Chair of SUHREC for noting/approval.

I am pleased to advise that, as submitted to date, ethics clearance for the project has been extended to end of April 2013 to complete the human research activity. Standard on-going ethics clearance conditions previously communicated and reprinted below still hold.

Please contact the Research Ethics Office if you have any queries about on-going ethics clearance, citing the SUHREC project number. Copies of clearance emails should be retained as part of project record-keeping.